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AUGUST 1983

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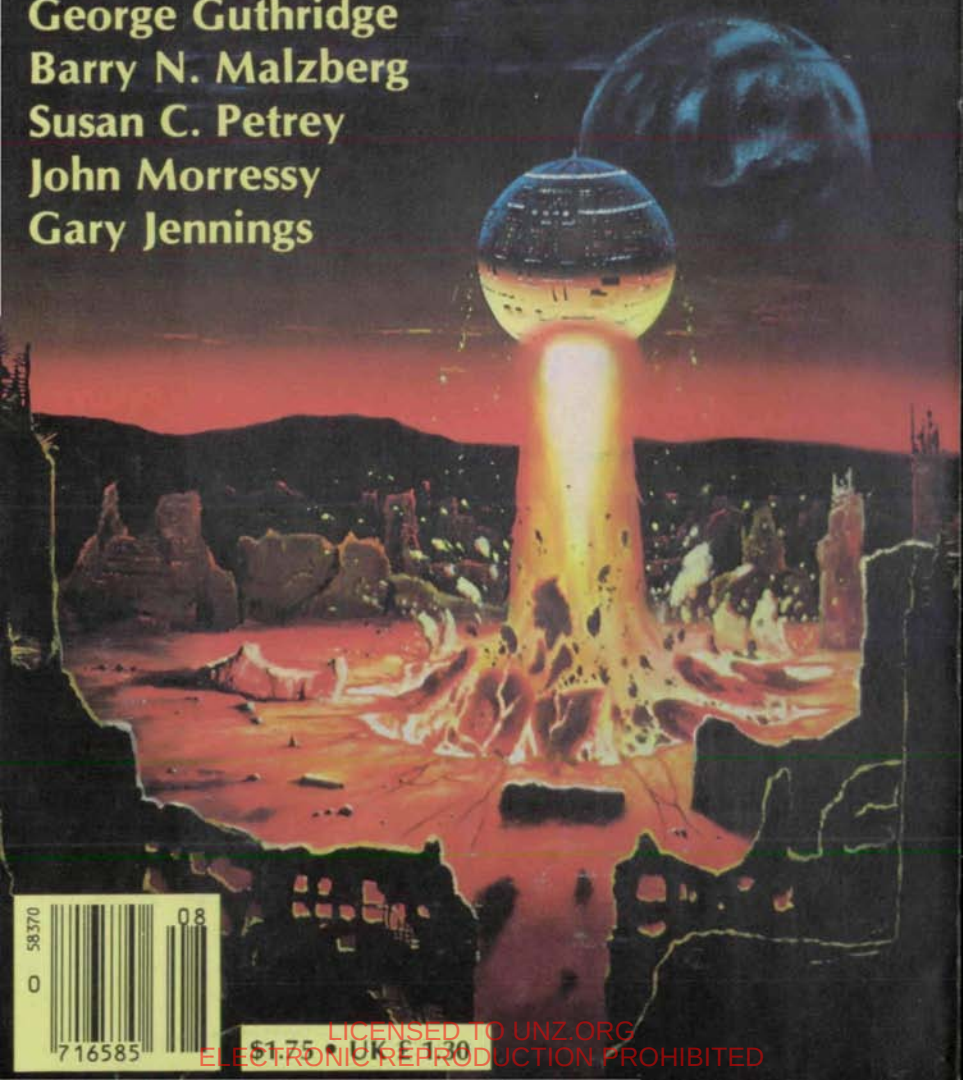

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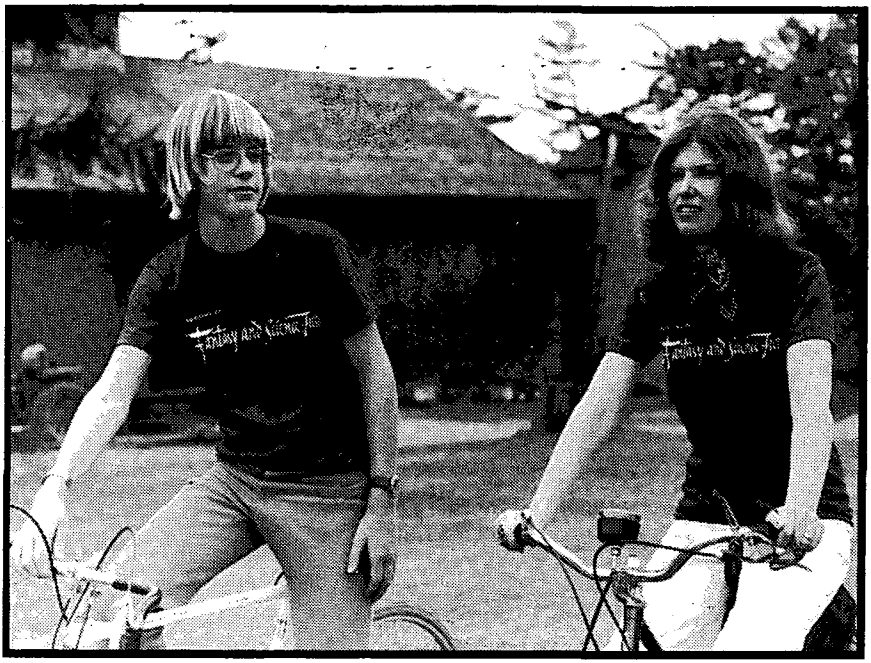

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Warren Brown wrote "Last Song of the Voiceless Man" (March 1981). His new story is about a group of survivors after a nuclear holocaust, who search in different ways for a new dream.

What We Did That Night In the Ruins

BY
WARREN BROWN

It stood like a giant white king of bright metal. I remember that. After twenty-five years, I remember. I dream about it, that great metal thing with PHOENIX painted so roughly on it. As smart as Yuri was, he couldn't paint straight letters. He'd never make a scribe. Couldn't write like Henry, my scribe. Hell, Henry can letter a proclamation or a privilege grant like no one you ever saw. Bosses from a half dozen turfs have offered me things for Henry that'd knock your eyes out: canned hams, a whole case full, septic tanks, a generator still in cosmolene. (Electric lights in the Bosshouse. Now that'd be something. Of course, no one's offered me light bulbs.)

This isn't about Henry, but I'll leave it to him to write up prettily so Jake, my son, can keep it in his archive. Jake's twenty-one now, and he'll be as good a boss as I've ever been — better I hope, considering what I did those twenty-five years ago.

But maybe that's a little unfair. It was what we did, Ely and I, and other council members for Coppertown. People know what happened if they were alive then. But folks don't live too long nowadays. Things are hard. Jake's mother died with him. And the one who should have been his mother — she went off.

Christ, I'm going on. I can't seem to get to the point anymore. Maybe it's old age, maybe the fever two winters ago. My hearing's been bad since then. Night vision's shot to hell. Who knows? Henry'll clean this up, he can do things with words. He's a good boy, even if he does throw the bull a bit.

Here's the point. I want it set down what we did that night in the ruins, and why. And I want it set down that I'm sorry — because Jenny left, and be-

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cause I blew a chance for all of us left on our little part of Earth. Poor old Earth.

It started the day Ely and I were out deer hunting. It's amazing the number of whitetails that were around then. There was sign all over the day we hunted — not like now. The deer were clever, though, and we'd been stalking most of the day without a decent shot. Ammunition was scarce, and you couldn't waste it. Then a whitetail did what they'll do, as smart as they usually are. He walked right out of a thicket and stared at us, not twenty yards away, the biggest rack you ever saw. Ely's eyes got big and he threw his old M-1 to his shoulder. It was then that the Russ strolled out of the jack pines right between us and the buck.

"Good morning," he said, and you almost couldn't hear the Russ accent. The buck snorted and popped into the air like a big tan grasshopper. He disappeared so fast; it was as if he'd never been there.

'Shit," Ely said, and kept his rifle up as if he was thinking of using it on the Russ, who stood there smiling. He could smile like a damned angel, that curly blond hair of his with those blue eyes made him look right out of the heavenly choir. That's part of what Jenny saw in him, I guess.

Anyway, Ely's no killer and never was. He lowered his rifle, red as C-juice in the face and just stared at the Russ, who I think knew right away he was in no danger. It was like that with him. He knew things right away.

"I am Yuri Polokov," he said. "I'm afraid I have made you miss a deer." He smiled the kind of smile you'd trust out with your sister. And I started to like him right then. Ely never did. And it'd be funny to think it all happened over one damned deer. Wouldn't it be funny?

"That's OK, Russ," I said, eyeing the automatic holstered at his belt. Like I said, I started to like him right then. But you don't get to be boss by trusting everybody you like. Ely had his eyes on him, too. True, Ely was no killer, but no victim either. (A good man at your back, Ely.) Things were getting a little tense. We were all just looking at each other.

"Joe Basse," I held out my hand, "Boss from Coppertown to the Canadian border, and east and west a hundred miles."

We shook, and I decided he was no freelander. He didn't have that dirty, fast look like a ferret. I could tell from the shake he was civilized. "Ely," I motioned him over, waving at him to shake. He hestitated, then reached out to the Russ. "Ely Towne," he mumbled, "councilman for Coppertown Bossland."

It wasn't warm, but it was good enough for Yuri. I watched him relax. He knew the rules. Then, like now, if you turned on a man after a shake you were dead and no questions. Meet again, shake again. No shake, you were washed up, and never turned

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your backs on each other. Things were hard then, and harder now. Sneaks get killed.

"You're a ways from home, Russ," Ely said, clicking the M-1's safety on.

"Where is home in these times?" Yuri shrugged. "Where there is work, and food, and men who will shake. Am I not right?"

"You're right enough," I said. He was.

Ely mumbled something like, "Slick talker."

"And just what is your work?" I asked. He was thin, not strong looking. But his hands were good. Plenty of callous. Not slicker's hands.

"I can do many things," he answered. And there was no big talk about it. "I can build with wood, and with stone. Blacksmith fair enough. And I can fix machines if you've got power for them. My father was an engineer in mechanics. I worked with him much as a youth."

"And you're looking for work?" I asked. "We've got plenty in Coppertown this time of year."

"Yes," he said, "for work and something else."

"And what would that be?" Ely asked, pulling out his red bandanna and blowing his nose.

"You will not laugh?" Yuri said, looking from me to Ely and back to me.

"Why should we?" I said. "There's lots to look for lately. Hell, you could be looking for the white ship and that'd be your business."

He looked startled when I said that. And I didn't know then just how much it took to startle him. (He was startled by the fire. But that's later.)

"I'm glad to hear that, Joe Basse," he said. And I can hear the sound of his voice in my mind even now, as if he was standing beside me. "For that is what I am looking for — the white ship. I am looking for that."

Besides the sound of his voice, the other sound I remember from that moment was the sound of Ely, choking on his tobacco.

It was warm in the Bosshouse that night where we sat at the big table near the fireplace. That's been one of the good things about being a hick boss up here in the U.P. The copper's been gone for over a hundred years, and outside of scenery, there's no resources anyone would want to come up here to steal. Anyway, with the Big Mac lying in the straits like a giant busted fish trap, it's a pain for people in the south to come up. All I mean to say is, we've always managed to have plenty of firewood. (Clean this up for me, Henry. The words just don't come right sometimes. It's like fire behind my eyes, like something's eating my brain. Damn fever.)

Yuri had his map spread out on the table. It was just him, Jenny, and me there. We'd eaten a ham from the doe I'd popped on the way back to town, and Ely had gone off to smoke the rest.

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Some of the men were out around the house as usual, in case any freelanders wandered in for a squabble. But inside we were alone. The map was in Russ.

"You see here," Yuri was saying, "here on the mitten." He was pointing to a spot off Lake Erie near where the new Fermi breeder reactor had once stood. My dad had grown up near there before heading north.

"Is it there?" Jenny asked him. She had a good voice, strong and sweet like the C-juice in our mugs, hot and spiced because it was September. Yuri shook his head.

"No, no it is not. There is nothing there but a great pit with sides of glass."

"Nuked?" Jenny asked, as if it was a magic word that might pop a woods boogy up right there in the Bosshouse. In a way it was a magic word, something no one could do anymore, like so many things good and bad. It was a history book word, or a Bible word, something like that.

Yuri nodded. "What fools we were."

"It was fifty years ago," I said. "A long time."

He looked at me, started to say something, then changed his mind and turned back to his map. I still wonder sometimes what he was going to say.

"It was the most secret thing you can imagine," he said. "How they could have done it, spent so much money, used so much talent. It's incredible."

"But you Russes knew about it," I said. "It couldn't have been that secret."

"The old government knew because they made a point of spying on the kind of people who could build a project like this. They knew something was going on, but they thought it was your government. The idea of such a private enterprise was beyond them."

"Beyond me, too," I said. Some people have the idea all bosses are rich. They're not.

"Your country was built on the imagination and wealth of private citizens," he said.

"But a fleet of space ships," Jenny said. "It still seems impossible."

"Not a fleet," Yuri said. "Only three. Three to carry a few hundred people away from what the builders knew was coming. One here at the site of the atomic plant blown up in the war, one here," he pointed on the map to somewhere in New Jersey, "and one — here." He moved his finger up until its tip was circling lightly round and round the U.P.

"But that's here," Jenny said, her pretty face glowing in the firelight. "It could be right near Coppertown."

"Such is my hope," he said, his eyes looking somewhere a long way off in the center of the fire. "Such is man's hope."

As we moved through the ruins that day a couple of weeks after Yuri first came, I kept thinking I'd made the

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wrong decision, that some crazy Russ had talked me into something I'd regret. I'd never been into the ruins before. For that matter, no one had that any of us knew. Ely, Sam, Tevis, Mark, we'd all grown up in new Coppertown, in good, strong log houses cut from straight trees and proof against any Michigan winter we'd seen.

Old Coppertown was ruined, hit by some wild nuke that had to have been badly off course when it came in. There could be no other reason for blasting an old burg of thirty or forty thousand descendants of a dead copper mining industry. But then, nothing about the world, let alone the war, made sense. What had happened, had happened. And we stayed away from it, until Yuri dragged us there. No, I'll be honest on that. He led us there. In the two weeks he'd been with us, he'd earned the respect of most everyone he was around, except Ely. There was the matter of that deer.

But Yuri could fix things no one else could fix, chop wood with the best of the men, weave with the best of the women, and just generally do damn near anything that needed doing. If I'd been the jealous type, I'd have been jealous of him. Jenny sometimes looked at him as if he was somebody sent from God. But it didn't bother me much because I was pretty impressed with him myself. I sometimes think that if he'd come right out and asked to be boss even in just those first two weeks there would have been moments I'd have let him. But the thing was, he didn't want to be. The white ship was what he wanted. And that's how we came to be in the ruins.

"This place was never nuked," he said to me, waving the wand of the radiation counter he'd brought with him.

"Never nuked," Ely said. "What in hell do you call it, then. These buildings is melted down like wax. What else could have done it?"

"I think a high-energy beam," he said. "A sort of death ray my country had developed and put in orbit so as to accurately strike certain of your most vital installations. They were very accurate."

"Why would they want to be accurate in hitting this place?" I asked. "This was just a town, no military installations. Not so much as a bullet would have been made anywhere here to contribute to the war effort."

"All the more reason to think they were after something specific," Yuri said.

"The ship?" I asked, for the first time really believing there might be something to his story. And after all, why should he make it up? What would he have to gain?

"Yes," he said. "As you saw from the map. Our military didn't know exactly where it was, or even what it was. But from the dead zone around the town, it seems as if the beam struck a ten- or twelve-square-kilometer area."

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"Why not just nuke the place; why get fancy with the beam?"

He shrugged. "Missiles were probably not targeted here. As you say, there was nothing of strategic importance. And my father told me some in our old military discounted the idea of such ships. Just as you do." He smiled.

"So somebody just made a last-minute decision to melt poor old Coppertown and thirty thousand people," I said.

He reached down to the crusted ash ground and picked something up. It was a china teacup, washed by the rain and looking almost new, except its rim had somehow melted towards itself and closed the cup opening, so it looked like a white tulip with a handle on it. Yuri turned the cup in his hand.

"I suppose so," he said so quietly I could barely hear him. He looked at me, his blue eyes pale and very clear in the afternoon light. "I have often wondered why the town of my father and mother was vaporized by a robot orbiter five years after the war was over, and why it waited that long to fire, and why it was targeted there. They had nothing strategic either."

I just looked at him. He'd never mentioned it before. He looked embarrassed, as if he'd forgotten to shake, or left food on his plate. "But there's no answer for it, is there?" he said then, and never mentioned it again.

We went on through the town, through the weeds and scrub pines, and the glassy, overgrown mounds whose frozen riverlets of stone and steel argued against the fact that they'd ever been houses and stores.

Yuri held a fat blue instrument out in front of himself, directing its dull-black snout slowly back and forth in a smooth arc. A small screen on the back of it glowed with jagged contours, occasionally lighting up in numbers and Russ words. He called it a seismic sounder, and it told him where there were voids down under the ground. With all the old copper mines around, it had been telling him there were plenty. But he walked right on, knowing what he was looking for.

I stuck with him, and Ely stuck with me, while the others would hang back from time to time to check out anything that might be of some use back home. We had good smiths and craftsmen, and willing workers, but some things from modern times you just can't make without special tools. There was so much to relearn. Try whipping up a simple storage jar sometime, and a lid to screw onto it. Things like that were worth finding. We didn't find any, but we did find something.

Yuri's sounder let out a sound for all the world like a puppy barking, a little sharp yelp that made Ely jump and scowl at the thing. He glared from it to Yuri. "That means something?" he said.

Yuri adjusted something on his device, as if he hadn't heard Ely. Then he turned to us, grinning like a cornered freelander.

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"Yes," he said, "it means that eighty meters below is a perfectly spherical chamber, nearly three hundred meters in diameter — with something inside it, something big."

"Well," said Ely, following a high flight of Canadas pushing across the sky in a V, "fancy that." The M-1 thumped hollowly and one of the geese tumbled from the formation. I remember how long it took him to fall. But I can't remember him ever hitting the ground.

A friend of mine came back from the west years ago. He almost hadn't made it. The weather's tough out there, and the people. The Indians especially are getting bad, I understand. My friend had nearly died.

"So what'd it get you?" I asked him. "Besides shot through the leg and nearly starved?"

He looked at me and said he'd seen the Grand Canyon. Walked up on it on the high rim and suddenly there it was in front of him. He said it had just taken his breath away. He was one tough boy. That canyon must have been something.

Something like the white ship it must have been. Because we'd found the entrance shaft to the underground cavity and gone down the endless flights of stairs to the bottom. It was dark as the devil's throat in that shaft, even in the steady green light of the glow bottles Yuri had mixed up.

I'd expected it to be hard to get in, big locks or something on the door. But it just stood open, as if someone had left and planned to come right back. But there was no one down there. No men, no bones of men. Nothing.

We swung the door open and the light from our glow bottles disappeared off into the black distance. Yuri started playing with a panel inside the door.

"There ought to be backup batteries," he said, jamming down a switch. Nothing happened. He searched around the panel some more and found some more switches he liked.

"Be careful with those," I said. But he threw them all at once with the blade of his hand. The place exploded with light and I threw my hand up in front of my eyes. "God damned," Ely said.

Then, through blinking and tears from the dust down the entrance shaft, it started to come into focus. And I knew how my friend had felt at the Grand Canyon. The ship was a vast pearl in a treasure cave. I don't know how many hundreds of meters high and across that big ball was. Looking back now, I think it couldn't have been as big as my memory says.

But there we were, people who lived in log houses in the woods, with nothing man-made of any scale near us but a melted town. And all of a sudden here was this mountain of metal, smooth, glowing in the blast of electric

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light — and even that light was foreign to us.

My throat knotted up and I damn near cried. Something about it was so beautiful and so damned sad. It was like remembering an important promise you make when you're young, and suddenly being old and knowing there's nothing you can do to keep it. That's how I felt.

"God damned," Ely said again.

"Not damned," Yuri answered. "Not damned any longer. We're all forgiven, my friends. This means we're all forgiven."

This is the part that's hard to tell, the part that makes my hand shake the pencil on the paper. It was high times for weeks after we found that ship. The whole town practically moved to the ruins. At least it seemed that way. Any given day or night, out of the few hundred of us there'd be at least half at the ship, either running around working under Yuri's direction or just sitting in the hanger looking at it. It was wonderful. It was exciting. Because he was going to make it work. He told us he could take us to the stars with it, and we believed him. A new world. A new start — away from the hunger and madness and despair that spread over most of the Earth like a black blanket.

At least some of us believed him.

"I never took you for a fool, Joe Basse," Ely said to me one night, when the fall was late and the night was cold. He'd been standing beside me at the ship, watching Yuri up on a rough pine scaffold, a brush in his hand painting PHOENIX in black letters on the pure white hull.

Ely said it right out of the blue. There was no one with us, which saved me from having to clip him. That was out-of-line talk to a boss. And he knew it.

"And I never knew you to take such chances, friend." I said, only half looking at him. I was watching Jenny, up on the scaffold with Yuri, her hand on his, helping him guide the brush. I was worried she might fall. I didn't like her taking chances that way. "You'd better speak your mind all the way, Ely."

"I will, Joe Basse," he said. "My mind says that ship's so white and bright it makes you blind. My mind says you ought to come up with me to the real world. Up where our homes and town are." He turned and started for the stairs then, not looking back at me. I couldn't figure why he was pushing me that way. It wasn't like him. I followed him up, not talking.

It was night on the surface. It'd been day when I went down. I hadn't realized how long I'd been with the ship, with the machines that talked and thought — and did whatever Yuri asked of them. That ship was a dream for me. A new world and me the boss of it.

Torches burned around the entrance to the underground hanger stairs, and burned in a line off through the woods, lighting the way to town.

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There were a lot of small fires around. People were camping near the ship more and more of the time. "Now tell me what's up with you, Ely," I said to him. "Bad hunting today, or what?"

"No hunting today, Joe," he said. "That's part of what's up with me. No hunting today, or yesterday, or even last week. And no putting up vegetables, and no weaving new blankets, and no caulking the cracks in the houses, and no gathering the firewood. My God, Joe, look around and tell me what you see."

I looked around, and saw the people of the town. "Don't play games with me, Ely. What am I supposed to see? Freelanders? All I see are my people. They're happy."

"That's the point, Joe. All these people. All these happy people. There are too many of them here, and down below. Nothing's been done lately. And nothing's being done now, except work on that damned white fooler down there. Winter's coming on, Joe — and the people are doing nothing but dreaming."

"The ship will be ready to go before winter," I said.

He stared at me then, the light from the torches making his eyes flicker redly. "Will it be ready, Joe? Who says it will? That Russ? He's smart, Joe, there's no denying. But he's just a man. Just one lousy man who's trying to make that thing work — that thing that's been down there for half a hundred years."

It sounded fantastic to me when Ely said it, fantastic in a way it never had from Yuri's lips. We had nothing, don't you see, nothing from electric times that worked. Everything we didn't make ourselves was junk. But I believed somehow that ship had been saved from time, that it would fly off into space as if it were new with a crew of engineers and scientists from the old times aboard. We still had some books; we knew what they used to be able to do. But when Ely said it, it made me feel like a fool.

"...remember last winter," he was saying. "Remember how bad it was?"

"But we did all right," I said. "We were warm, and had plenty of food. We only lost a few to sickness."

"We were warm because we worked like hell. We had food because we worked like hell — before the winter. Don't you see, Joe? It's nearly too late now. If we don't do something, it'll be the end for us."

"Maybe you're right," I said, confused, starting to realize a lot of what he said was true. No work had been getting done. Just getting by was all we had been doing. We'd all been counting on the ship.

"I'd better get things organized. We can postpone taking off until the spring. I'll call a meeting in the morning and give the orders."

Ely shook his head. "And how many will follow them, Joe? Fewer than you've got fingers, I'll bet."

"I'm still the Boss, Ely. People

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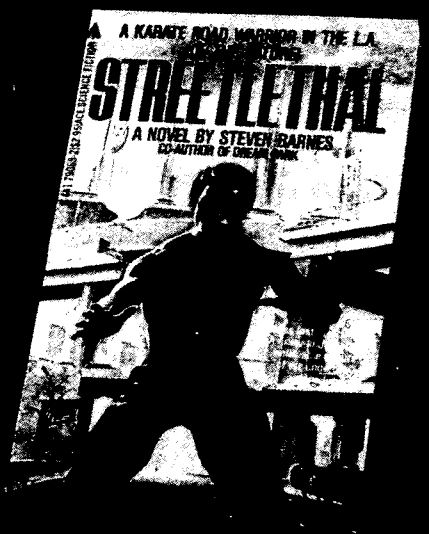

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will do what I say."

"People will do what they want and what they have to, Joe. You know that."

He was right. I did know it. One of the things that kept me Boss, one of the thing I understood about leading was that you've got to make sure you tell people to do what they want to do anyway — even when they don't know themselves. Their Boss is an extension of them, of their hearts and minds. They're with him only if he's with them.

I looked at Ely hard. He was a tough man. But I looked at him hard until he wouldn't meet my eyes. "You've steered me into something, Ely. At least you're trying to. You've got some idea and you haven't come out with it yet. Have you gotten to be a coward while I haven't been looking?"

"It's not just me, Joe. It's the rest of the council, too. They're all at the Bosshouse now. They want to get this thing settled tonight."

And they were all at the Bosshouse. Sam and Mark, Tevis, Hirem, Eunice. They were at the Bosshouse with their ideas, which were all the same, and their dipper of C-juice, which was hot and sharp and made things all so clear to me. The ship could never fly. The winter would starve us. Yuri was crazy, and making everyone crazy. And there was the thing about Jenny and him, the thing that everyone knew but me. How I came to hate him that night, so much that I didn't realize how

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the council always had hated him — for what he knew that they couldn't know, what he had that they could never have.

It was easy to get the people back to town by setting the fire in the empty grain house. People will always run to a fire. They have to. Even Yuri. Even Jenny.

So here I am in the Jersey wastes, looking down into the cave so much like the one we found under the ruins, a big empty underground egg where something hatched and flew, leaving the insides all burn-stained.

I wonder who they took with them — Jenny and Yuri, or if they found anyone to take. I hope they did. I haven't seen anyone for a month.

It would have held all of Coppertown, that white ship. Could have, too, if not for what we did that night in the ruins — if not for what I did.

But Ely's dead, and I'm nearly dead, and life's too hard for regrets. But God, I wish we could have gone with them — to find whatever they'll find, or whatever they've found. Who knows how fast it goes, or how far? It makes my 1,200-mile walk seem pretty tame. At least I know the answer now. At least I didn't wreck Yuri's chance for a new world, or Jenny's.

Maybe it's the message in the metal tube he left in the Jersey wastes that gets me most. He did know things, that's for sure. "We made it, Joe Basse," is all it said. He knew I'd come looking.

What I want to know now is how I can get this to Henry, my scribe, to clean it up. It's a long way back, and I'm tired. And it's cold, so cold. Like the night we set the fire in the grain house. Like the night we set the fire in the white ship.

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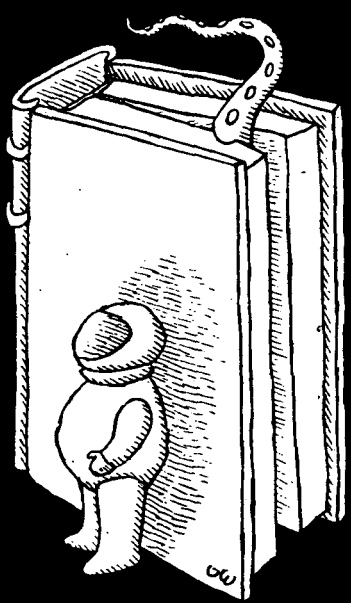
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Prometheus Man, Ray Faraday Nelson, Starblaze, $5.95.

The First Book of Swords, Fred Saberhagen, Tor, $6.95.

The House of The Lions, L.T. Stuart, Bantam, $2.95.

Christine, Stephen King, Viking, $17.75.

Well, every once in a while there has to be a month like this, I suppose. The timing belt fails on a perfectly sound engine, your cat disassembles a robin all over the living room rug, the wine for your anniversary dinner turns out to have a dry cork under the gummy foil.

Still and all, does it have to be a month in which the best book is barely either fantasy or science fiction?

We'll get to that one. Meanwhile:

Ray Nelson has, for the past three decades, been something of a legend in his own time. My own first encounter with his work took place in the pages of Harlan Ellison's early '50s fanzine, where Nelson's mordant, pointed observations on human folly opened my eyes with a click. It had not until then occured to me that it was O.K. to express, without humor or any other leavening, the sorts of judgments one might occasionally reach while rubbing up against other people in the movie ticket line, the supermarket, or the church picnic.

It was obviously O.K. with Nelson, and he went about expressing himself with a talent for venom which could

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only have sprung from a mind that was both intelligent and — rarer — independent. Here was, it seemed plain to me, an uncommon observer of the human scene, and agree with him or not there was no question but that his viewpoint was both coherent and considerable. Nor was I at all alone in feeling this way about his essays. If it sometimes seemed to me that he was deliberately avoiding any opportunity to find anything good in the human situation and in human nature, it was also plain to me that he was striking a chord to which many of us resonated.

I didn't know, and don't know, where Harlan had found Nelson. Or vice versa. Uncharacteristically, Ellison simply ran Nelson letters and more formal Nelson prose as a regular thing in *Dimensions*, reserving his enthusiastic blurbs and exegeses for some of the other contributions that packed his publication to the staple-bursting point. Perhaps he wasn't sure how his readers felt about someone who regularly called much of the human race a collection of puling idiots. Perhaps many of us weren't sure. But Nelson had style, and there was a sense that behind his scorn lay a vast disappointment born of unrequited love.

If so, it was a ferocious love indeed. The *Dimensions* readers I knew personally, and with whom I discussed Nelson, were none of us as convinced of humanity's worthlessness as he appeared to be. Somehow, some of us felt this as a shortcoming within ourselves; to be so much more bitter than us was to suggest an equally greater capacity for optimism.

In the case of some of us, this surfaced again, years later, when a Milford SF workshop was suddenly made privy to a Nelson fiction manuscript. Nelson, of course, was not in attendance. The anxious editor, however, wanted us assembled practitioners to find some logical construct that would allow him to publish the manuscript. He very much wanted to buy it. But it bristled with what we in the 1950s could all recognize as "obscenity." Some of us even called it pornographic, which meant that in the 1950s we were slamming the door on it irrevocably.

It was the first piece of Nelson fiction I had ever read — and I wasn't sure I had a right to read it — and as such I approached it with an appropriate species of anticipation that was it seemed to me fully borne out by the work.

The work became, eventually and transmogrified, "Turn Off the Sky," F&SF, August, 1963. Nelson has published several times in this magazine, and he has published several novels — *Blake's Progress* being the one he's most proud of — but he has never emerged in the community's consciousness as a name with instant recognition value. He does get a six-inch, eye-opening entry in the Nicholls *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, which cites his credentials as a cartoonist, as the original promulgator of the propeller beanie, and as a one-time collaborator

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with Philip K. Dick. But that just underscores the point: here is someone who has contributed much and gotten little credit for it in the oral tradition that is far more prestigious than any printed reference.

Starblaze Books, under the editorship of Hank Stine, now promises to alter this condition. There are plans to publish an expanded *Blake's Progress* and the novel, *Turn Off the Sky*, into which that 1950s shadow-story grew and from which the 1960s F&SF novella was digested. I look forward to it. But it's a shame the program had to begin with *The Prometheus Man*, a completely ennervated story.

We are told, in a Robert Silverberg introduction that is too kind, that this work is in the tradition of Wells, Huxley, Zamyatin and Orwell. This is true only to the extent that any novel promising to strike to the root of social injustice and to propose a different order can be said to be so. Nelson the essayist had a great deal to say that approached the level of insight found in mighty fiction by sharp thinkers. Nelson the novelist in *The Prometheus Man* is a slipshod plotter, an inept characterizer, a monotonist, and, most important, incapable of forwarding any concept that was not vitiated by fuzzy thinkers long before him.*

I will spare you the details of the story. In rough outline, Holly and Newton divorce because she passes the social screening and is permitted to have a career among the "Techs," while he flunks and becomes an "Un" — a social parasite living on the dole. She is recruited by Prometheus, a poorly-defined corporation that operates Valhalla, a Buckminster Fuller geodesic hot air balloon arcology that need never come down, is fully self-contained, and will survive the coming social collapse. In part, this will be true because, somewhere, the founder of Prometheus has hidden a crystal that contains all human technical knowledge. This information will bring humanity back out of the dark age, and technical reason will rule the world thereafter.

Newt, meanwhile, is sent to Berkeley, a Silverbergian urban monad where the Uns dwell. There he meets Victor, the revolutionary, and the Baboo, a simple, childlike prophet of nonviolence who composes on the poom-poom, a home-made stringed instrument, creating songs like "If we could share this world below, we'd need no world above."

A palimpsest if there ever was one, Newt in short order becomes Baboo's most eager disciple, a key cog in Vic-

He is not helped — though not significantly hindered — by Starblaze's production, which mis-spells his name (and Philip Dick's), chooses display type in which the Rs and As cannot be distinguished from each other except under close study, and is rife with typographical error: "Smith continued... 'May you never thrist!' 'May you never thrist,' they echoed...." (P. 199, by which time this is merely funny.)

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tor's revolutionary machine, and the love-object of a hunchbacked girl who eventually sells herself to torture researchers in order to buy Newt's freedom. This in turn leads to his becoming the Hit Parade singing idol of the year and to triggering the revolution, while Holly's machinations aboard Valhalla lead only to disaster. Eventually, he and Holly rejoin each other, and — Holly having finally found the crystal, but never telling us where — repudiate the crystal, vowing to keep "only the good parts of science." Singing in the midst of the stench and flame, they go forward together into the roseate future.

Even if embodied in a fictional frame with some sense of pacing and dramatic value, even if given into the hands of characters with some substance and an ability to speak rather than declaim, this is a confused and contradictory message. Is this what fifty-two years of life and thought have precipitated in Ray Nelson? That we are to become simple and childlike, "sharing," and being able to distinguish the "good" and "bad" parts of The Tree of Knowledge?

This doctrine would be simplistic even for Rod McKuen. For Radell Faraday Nelson, it betokens a self-betrayal that is uncomfortably like a betrayal of us all.

Here's a book you'll wish you hadn't spent the money on: *The First Book of Swords* ought to be retitled *Some Part of The Book of Swords.* Fred Saberhagen can write like blazes, and it's becoming increasingly clear that, good as he is at science fiction, heroic fantasy is his major metier. The infuriating part of this book is that it *is* so well done, introducing characters, situations, mental pictures and a central premise that are all above the ordinary. But does it get anywhere? Ah, no — for that, you have to spend another $6.95 on the *next* book in the series, in the perhaps foolish assumption that it will at least begin to resolve some of these permutations. With any luck, Tor will be able to drag a great many $6.95s out of you before you grow tired of the game.

This is, I think, the most outrageous example thus far of the endemic and already sufficiently notorious sequel-game that many publishers are playing. There are now literally scores of fragmented "epics" running, each book deliberately unfinished, each narrative deliberately dragged out, each sucking money almost shamelessly out of its readers' pockets. It is, I think, time to rebel against this trend.

L.T. Stuart is a writer whose name I don't recognize, but which I expect to see again. I certainly hope to, because Stuart is uncommonly gifted with a writer's imagination.

The House of The Lions ultimately trails off into a thin and perfunctory resolution, probably because its attempted scope could never be fitted in-

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to a 184-page paperback text. But enroute to this wan denuement it passes through some very fine moments.

You may not have thought there was another good post-Apocalypse story to be found. Stuart — for all that *House* ultimately fails to flesh it out — convincingly demonstrates that there was.

Set in Manhattan at some indeterminate time after the collapse of technology, this is the story of The Sinner Priest, Youngman Snag, of the Church of the Angel Bob. Situated some distance down the main thoroughfare of York from the Cathedral of the Divine Sarah, his church also affords nearby access to the underground, where the mutants, vampires and Jews dwell in fear of pogroms executed by General Ba and his army of goliaths on the orders of King Bronks. Bronks, a sapient but megalomaniacal ruler, reigns from the Rockefeller Center ice rink, a few blocks up from The House of the Lions at the corner of Fifth and 42nd.

Snag is on the model of the glorious innocent. Humble, pious, dedicated to the doing of charitable works, he comes into possession of a microfiche from the ransacked public library, and thereby, in the end, evokes the legendary white knight who brings down Ba, Bronks, and even the epicene Holy Husband Gorge, and thus restores hope to the world.

Stuart does an excellent job of creating his barbaric future, complete with its half-comprehensible religion, its cast of characters as rich as some counterpart to the Bayeux tapestry, and its clangorous, noisesome setting. I definitely think you should read this book, for the pictures it will make in your mind, even though they do not then go on to form a recapitulated whole.

Stuart wavers too much. The viewpoint, at times well within the minds of such characters as Snag and the even less fortunate farmer, Dregh, unpredictably pulls back into omniscience at times. Those are the times when Stuart loses faith in Stuart's powers; when it is felt necessary to explain in about so many words that Snag had wandered into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, whereas in truth no reader at this point wants to have the spell broken, and just where and what the Palace in the Jungle may be is irrelevant in the light of what Snag makes it be.

There is a fire-breathing tiger, as there are actual vampires which are essentially flying mouths and bloodbags. Picturesque, but why hasn't the tiger long ago scorched the entire city to the ground, and what do the vampires feed on in the ordinary course of things? It *almost* makes sense, in terms of giant soldiers, the very well imagined Undying Ones, and the presence of beings whom even the ordinary citizens of this mutated world can segregate as mutants, but it goes one stage too far. In a world of so many intrinsic wonders, dragging in extra ones is a

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conspicuous and doomed activity.

And the ending is bathetic, rushed, and insufficient to redeem the book's over-all promise.

I would have to assume this is an editor's fault, and if not a specific editor's, then the publisher's fault, and if not the publisher's, then the market climate's fault. So in a sense it's our fault, and that makes it even more galling.

It would have done this book, and Stuart, and ultimately us, a great deal of good to send this manuscript back for completion and refining. But, no, they have sold it to us as is, and we have validated their enterprise to the extent that we have supported it financially. So I tell you to buy this book, and yet I wish I hadn't.

And we come to the rather good book — Stephen King's *Christine* — and we first have to talk about why it's hardly fantasy.

Why not? It's about a 1957 Plymouth Fury which acts to capture the soul of the adolescent boy who compulsively attempts to restore it, and which turns out to be the instrument of a supernally evil old man's attempt to attain a particularly repulsive and parasitic immortality. Is that not fantasy?

It could be. It certainly could. But if fantasy is whatever you're pointing to when you say the word, then there's something seriously lacking here. And what that is, is the sense that King's myth in any way attempts to explain how it fits into the universe we can see.

This may not be a sufficient reason to quibble over its credentials as speculative fiction. But it certainly isn't science fiction — the car heals itself whenever it's done battering down walls to smash a victim into pulp, and the healing violates all the known laws of ordinary physics, including not only Newton's but Murphy's. It has no rigor of physical cause and effect. So if it's going to couple up to any of the psychic predilections that lead people to read something called *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, it has to in some way evoke the rationality of magic. If it can't evoke the sorts of magic we're accustomed to, then it ought to profer a logical if unprecedented magic of its own.

It doesn't. The car's powers vary in ways that don't correspond to cause and effect. If it's haunted by the old man's ghost, which would explain much, how did it exercise those powers while the old man was still alive, and why did he weep when it was being driven away?* Why did it pick on Arnie, of all unlikely people? Simply because he, of all the high school boys it might have selected, was a social outcast?

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Arnie is us; the 98-lb. weakling with the unlovely exterior and the hidden good nature no

*Tell you the truth, he may have been laughing, but I don't think so.

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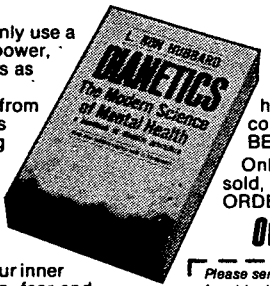

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one lets him display. What this book is, in the end, is an exploitation of our secret conviction that we will *never* win. It's more phantasie than fantasy ... a good deal more, a wicked deal more.

I'm not sure we ought to let ourselves be exploited in that way. But, meanwhile—

Meanwhile, King is at his very best when he's writing about adolescence, and *Christine* is, by my lights, the best full-length work from Stephen King that I've ever read. Either because he's finally done his homework or because his editors have become more conscientious in conveying his manuscript into print, it's also almost totally free of the usual King errors about cars and the adolescent glory of hop-up parts and the hop-up world. So free that I can't be sure the remaining quibbles aren't errors of mine.

Maybe this quibble about fantasy is another error of mine. I come back to Lovecraft again, and his echo in King, who propounds the theory that there is some "great wave" of extra-human, extra-universal intelligence that decrees how things really go. If we idolize HPL, how not King, who can not only do everything the Bard of Providence could do but can do it in the vernacular?

Yeah. Well, there you are, see? It's not only a good book — and it is; I couldn't put it down and was sorry when it ended — but it belongs among us.

I have said this before: What does this say about us? And why do we tolerate it?

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Mark Wheeler's first F&SF story concerns a musician and a mathematician whose lives are quite literally linked by an unbreakable tether. It is a fascinating partnership and a fascinating story, from a young British writer who lives not far from Arthur C. Clarke's hometown.

Life On the Tether

BY

MARK WHEELER

We're going to have a baby, Dirac and me.

The autodoc came back with the sad news today during our weekly checkup. It whirred and chugged and the probe withdrew from my side, snaking away into its sterile sheath, and the printout came up on the screen. It was enough to take my breath away. Dirac had tears in his eyes. Up till that moment it had been a usual morning, with us laughing and joking over breakfast and on our way up there to the room next to the bathroom where we stored the autodoc, but now a heavy weight had descended, like a thick and veiling cloud over our thoughts. I reached out to touch his cheek reassuringly with a finger, but he gently stopped me and our eyes locked for a few seconds. We learned to read each other's thoughts pretty well over the years, and I can tell you that we hurt.

"We should have been sterilized," Dirac said after an awful silence, one of the longest I've endured since childhood, when we would sit naked watching each other for hours, not touching, just exploring with warm gazes. Now his words rung out like a tenor bell across the canyon, ringing out the absolute truth: we should have been sterilized, long ago. But everyone thought we could be trusted.

"A bit late for should-haves and should-not-haves now, isn't it?"

"But what do we do now?" He had to ask the obvious question.

Twisting around on the couch so that I could stare out the window across the canyon, I gave the obvious answer: "Wait. There's nothing else we *can* do." It was raining today, the drops obscured the far canyon wall behind a sheet of water-gray misery. I

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could almost feel Dirac's staring eyes on my neck.

He started, "We could—"

"No, Dirac. I don't think that is the answer.... We should have lived up to their trust. I...." I could just picture what Helen would say when we broke the news to her. And the press would have a field day.

"Screw them," he raged. "I'm a man, not a child. I can't help having a sex drive."

"And I'm a woman, Dirac. I will not accept abortion, which I think you were about to suggest. Having or not having the child isn't the issue involved — at least not in the eyes of the media and public."

"I was just thinking that if we found a very private clinic where the child could be aborted before anyone else found out—"

"We could, maybe, gloss the whole thing over?"

He nodded. "I was only thinking of you, dear."

"Dirac. You can't hide something like this indefinitely whether we have an abortion or not. We are in the public eye too much, it's bound to slip through someone's lips at some time. You're the great musician, and I, the tagalong mathematician; we can't hide anything for long."

Another silence. Then Dirac drew himself up from the couch and walked toward the door until the umbilical became taut. "I think it's time for my practice. And you should get on with your work, too. It'll take your mind off this. Let them scream and yell all they want as long as they keep buying my tapes. We've got our own life to live ... Haven't we?"

Finally I tore my gaze from the window and got up, knowing full well that if I chose to sit there all day there was nothing Dirac could do, nowhere he could go without me.

Such is our life.

When we were nine or ten we used to go fishing in the wide stream that flows through Coldwater Canyon. Clamboring over boulders, taking the least obvious route, but always careful, always together, never more than three meters apart. On that particular day, it was my turn to look after the umbilical, keeping the ugly purple-gray cord from snagging on outcroppings or tangling around our limbs so we fell over. On the few occasions that we did stretch it a bit far, Dirac would clutch at his navel, where the cord joined his body, and give me agonizing little glares and tell me insistently to be more careful, I could kill us both: Helen said so. I hated that damn umbilical and cursed under my breath every time I felt a twinge of retort pull at my belly, every time it got too taut.

As I was tending the lifeline on that bright and sunny childhood day, Dirac had to carry the blue nylon rucksack with our rods and reels and lunches inside. It was a time for loud laughter

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and playful jibing and fighting on the muddy beach around the small lake on the canyon floor, into which the stream ran. A day away from our books and tutors and keyboards and incessant lessons. A warm breeze disturbed the brush on the lower slopes of the canyon walls. The climb down was all stark shadows, sliding on shingle and grabbing at the dry brush, kicking tumbleweeds and laughing freely.

Helen — that's our mother — was always telling us to be very careful with the umbilical. Dirac took her far more seriously than I did. He took everything that little more seriously than I; he had read some chips about composers and had made up his mind to become a serious musician when he grew up. I wanted to be an astronaut, so we were always arguing over who would give up his career. Although we led a fairly sheltered childhood in many ways, we knew from very early on that there were no other children joined together like us, by a cord. Dirac used to blame me, when we were hardly more than babies, saying we were being punished for my misbehavior when we were babies. I hated him a lot when we were small, but fishing trips were always fun.

Except that one occasion.

It started off well enough. We slid down the hill and ended up as an exhausted heap on the shingle and mud, baked hard by the summer sun. We lay there for a few minutes extricating ourselves from the tangle of limbs and umbilical, then Dirac unpacked the rods and assembled them with his deft, agile fingers. I coiled up the grisly cord and hooked it over my shoulder, like a climber's rope. I didn't hate my brother today, and we stayed quite close together. For such a young girl there is love and there is hate with no gray area between the two. A pendulum swings between the two extremes, pretty swiftly sometimes.

Soon we were standing in a familiar spot casting our lines into a quick eddy where fish congregated leisurely, making it a good hunting point. Angling is mostly patience, something sorely lacking in bubbling youngsters. I think if it had not been for that eddy current we would never have caught anything, and would have given up trying long ago.

"I'm going to catch a catfish next," I proclaimed after we had each landed a few small roach.

"Stupid!" Dirac cried and began to laugh. "You don't get catfish in rivers or creeks. It—"

"Why not?" Then, "I bet you *do*."

"No, you don't, silly. Trust a girl not to know that catfish come from the sea." He laughed again.

"I bet you're just saying that so you can catch one first."

"I'm a better fisherman than you, anyway. You can't play piano or anything!"

"Angler," I corrected him, sulkily.

"You can't do calculus," I retorted then. Dirac replied that he didn't want

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to do silly calculus. I said I didn't want to play toccatas, which was a lie. I yearned to be able to play anything on Dirac's keyboards, so that I could play along with him and have fun instead of doing my lessons. His practice time was the worst part of the day: my darling brother refused to use headphones when he worked, so I had to try to do my work listening to every note, flawless scale, and toccata when he chose to show off his technique, natural musician that he was.

He shouldn't have pushed me. Suddenly he lunged at me, knocking me off balance. I landed heavily, half in the creek. "Bastard," I screamed. It was my new word at the time.

"If I am, you are, too," he said taking up the slack in the umbilical as though it were a rescue line thrown in haste to a drowning child. I got angrily to my feet, shocked slightly by the coldness of the water. Dirac wasn't expecting me to shove him back. He landed in the water with a splash, knocking me as he went so that I tumbled in on top of him. We thumped and kicked in the cool clear water until, by some twist of fortune, I sat across his chest pummeling his crossed arms where they had risen to protect his face.

"I'm going to kill you," I screamed. On impulse I grabbed at the gray umbilical which was writhing around us in the water and squeezed it with all the might in my young arms. In a few short seconds Dirac stopped struggling, and even through the water that swilled over him I could see the terror in his face. He began to wail at me to let go.

"You'll kill us both, idiot. Oh, let go, Maura, please. I'm sorry," he yelled as loud as he could with me sitting on him.

"I don't care. You'll die before me, and then I'll let go and stay alive and be able to live alone like normal people and have my own friends in a big school. I hate you Dirac, and I hate being attached to you all the time."

Then Dirac couldn't speak, partly because of the water washing over his face as he struggled for air, but mostly because of my grip on the umbilical. I felt a little dizzy myself, but the effect it was having on my brother was quite astonishing. His normally apple red cheeks paled almost instantly and bloated vulgarly, and his eyes took on an odd stare. He seemed to be having difficulty moving.

My anger dissolved into fear, and finally I let go of the cord and got to my feet to stand on the mud and shingle shore waiting, hoping he'd recover quickly. In a few minutes he was able to stand. He began to cry pathetically, with his arms draped at his sides like a rag doll with starched legs. Somehow that made everything all right.

We ignored each other for an hour while we ate our packed lunches and dried out in the hot sunshine. I stripped to my undershorts, spread my thin blouse and skirt on a rock, and lay

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still, trying to improve my tan. Dirac sat with his back to me, resting on his elbows, moping.

"I'm gonna tell Helen 'bout that."

"Don't, Dirac. She'll only get annoyed at both of us, she gets sore so easily. I'll let you have my share of the fish. And when I catch my catfish, I'll let you have it, too, if you want."

"Mau," he said. My name is Maura, but I let him call me Mau. "Mau? Don't ever do that again, not ever."

In the silence we began collecting our things together, all strewn within the three-meter stretch of the umbilical, our life-giving tether. I got dressed last, and we climbed single file up the canyon slope, and it wasn't until we were halfway home that the brooding silence was broken.

"You can't catch catfish in the creek," Dirac explained quietly. "You have to go to the ocean, across state."

"Then we'll go there one day, when we're famous," I said, pulling at my damp, sticky blouse. And falling silent again, the parabiotic duo, slightly damp, a little older, headed for home.

While Dirac ran his fluid fingers over his keys, I tapped and scribbled at my terminal. I found it impossible to concentrate. Somehow the integrals wouldn't gel, and on the screen curves danced and writhed like strands of syrup on a hotplate. My mind wouldn't settle into the familiar patterns of work, and it had nothing to do with the music coming from the speakers across the room. We had always shared the same study, and I had long since learned how to ignore Dirac while I worked. Sometimes it helped, and had the virtue of making us pleasantly rich.

I sat back and snapped my terminal over to hold. The dancing patterns on the screen instantly froze. I was too affected to work.

We should have been more careful, obviously. But what could we do? I couldn't use normal contraceptive pills because they messed up my brother's hormone balance. Caps, coils, or condoms were out of the question also: we would have to buy such things, and then everyone would know that we were not the celibate whiter-thans that everyone took us for. So we used the ancient Catholic institution of moderation and rhythm. But it did us no more good than it had the Catholics.

Suddenly I felt like breaking something, anything to release the surge of pent-up energy that was coiling my stomach. I cleared the computer screen and tapped into the phone lines, hitting the keys with such force that the terminal shook as I dialed. Helen's face soon appeared on the screen, smiling. "Hi, honies," she began as always. Her smile faded as my expression registered in her brain. "Where's your brother?"

Suddenly distracted by the voices behind him, Dirac stopped playing and joined us at the terminal. "Hello,

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Helen. How are you?" he asked, moving into the camera's field of vision.

Dispensing with banalities, I said, "Mother, I think you'd better get over here, right away. And get in touch with Dr. Campbell."

"My dear, what is the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost. The umbilical, it is ... intact, isn't it?"

"Of course." Perhaps that's the bloody problem, I thought bitterly. "Can't explain now, just get over here, will you?"

"I'm on my way." The phone went dead. I turned to Dirac's questioning gaze.

"I think it's better that we get everything out in the open as early as possible. Christ, Dirac ... I should be the happiest girl in the world this morning: I'm pregnant. Why do I feel so damn guilty?" For the first time in a long while I began to cry. "Why can't we live like two normal human beings?"

"Because I guess we aren't two normal human beings. I think we would have done better to wait a few days until we got ourselves sorted out, before telling anyone about this.... Do you think she'll be hostile?"

I almost managed to laugh. Hostile? "Dirac, remember all those little pep talks we got when we were kids, warning us in veiled terms about the horrors that happened to naughty boys and girls? Hostile? It might be best to give her a tranquilizer before we tell her. She isn't going to take this easily."

* * *

She didn't. Her face drained and her eyes clouded and she began to shake gently. "What on earth made you do it?" she asked, imploringly.

Dirac hung his head like a punished child. He was always less willing to stand up to her than I. We were all sitting in the large lounge at the rear of the house where huge patio doors looked out across the canyon where we had spent most of our lives.

"We aren't children, Mother. We are adult human beings, and like any other people we have sexual desires," I explained, keeping my voice level to hide the resentment I felt. I wanted to scream at her to mind her own damn business.

"It's immoral," she announced.

"Is it moral, fair, whatever, to chain two people together for life and expect them to behave like — like good little children?"

"If you weren't joined together you'd both be dead, remember that," she raised her voice again.

Dirac lifted his head and joined the conversation for the first time. "It's too late for argument over morality. What we have to decide is how to deal with the situation, moral or otherwise."

"Abort it," Helen said. The way she spoke indicated that to her mind, there was no alternative.

"I agree," Dirac nodded.

"No," I insisted. "I will not get rid of my child simply because society is too narrow-minded to accept unique situations."

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"Like what?" Helen asked. "Incest? A 'unique situation'?"

"Not that, as such. Dirac and I, we are unique."

"Maura, listen to me. You and Dirac are famous people. Something like this would seriously harm your income." Always the cool business head, our Helen.

And so it went, around in circles. I thought Dirac might have stuck up for me a bit more. After all, it was his child we were discussing, too. He always was scared of Helen. I stopped listening to them and stared out through the rain. By the time Helen left it was late afternoon, and a depressing gloom had settled in the lounge.

"You could be a bit more open-minded about it," Dirac told me.

"I am being open-minded: I'm accepting the situation. It's you and she who are close-minded, programmed by an outdated society. Incest started out unfavorably because it didn't help spread genes, never advanced the status quo. It was adopted by religion and has hung over us like a disease ever since. We can design people artifically now — you and I are living proof of that. Disgust of incest is outmoded!"

Dirac and I were the result of an experiment to breed a genius. Genetic researchers designed us — well, one of us, anyway. When the egg was implanted into Helen, the host mother, it divided by some fluke, and then there were two of us. They almost aborted us and started again, being unsure of how the splitting process might affect their carefully laid plans, but the prospect of creating twin geniuses was something Campbell and Pele couldn't turn down. So the two embryos matured side by side in the womb. It wasn't until shortly before they were due to be born that analysis showed certain irregularities. The effects of these flaws — we've been told they were caused by irregular splitting of the cell — was such that neither child would survive long once born. Further investigation suggested that the flaws were different in each of us, and in fact dovetailed, and that, as a single organism, we might be able to function normally. So they dug us out by Caesarean, and when we were strong enough they performed extensive surgery and linked us via the umbilical. The hairline scars that crisscrossed our bodies were virtually invisible after twenty-two years.

They did it for two reasons: to save the possible genius we might have, and to see if it were possible to create a workable parabiotic human organism. The initial genetic experiment had been very expensive, so I suppose it was only natural that they wanted to see their work come to fruition. After botching it the first time, it was unlikely that they'd get funding for a second attempt.

Dirac was a natural musician. And I had achieved recognition at fifteen for solving — rather proving — Fer-

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mat's Last Theorem, which had been puzzling mathematicians for quite some time. It was annoying to think that the Nobel had gone to Campbell and Pele for making us possible.

Dr. Kennet Campbell was an often overpowering man. Two meters tall, an ex-American footballer in his college days, he was built like an asteroid — Ceres. He had ridiculously bushy eyebrows that met over a twisted nose that was a legacy of his sporting days on and off the field. I often felt uncomfortable in his bountiful presence. He seemed to exude an air of ownership over us. It was as though he looked down on us because our intelligence came out of jar and he held the recipe. I'd spoken to Dirac about it and he felt more or less the same. But most of the time Kennet Campbell was a deeply understanding man, with a wicked sense of humor when he felt so inclined. That made me feel uneasy, too.

Jarbabies, he called us.

He wore a gargantuan frown when we answered the door the morning after. He stepped inside and shook snow from his hair. "Haven't seen snow in years," he commented, handing Dirac his coat. "Now what's all this? Helen called me in the middle of the night and told me to drop what I was doing and get over here. I told her that would be rude to a certain female party. Helen said, and I quote, 'To hell with the hussy. Maura's gone mad!' And then she apologized for interrupting me and hung up. Would you kindly explain her behavior, I can't reach her this morning." He strode into the breakfast room, and we followed dutifully in his wake. When he had taken a seat at the glass-topped table and poured himself a mug of black coffee, I pushed my plate aside and told him.

"You don't seem surprised?" Dirac noted, when I finished.

"Well, Jarbabies," he began, almost smiling, in his grim sort of way. "I have known you two well for a few years now. I'm your doctor, remember? I noticed that Mau had lost her virginity at seventeen, that time she had a urinal infection. Of course I didn't say anything: I didn't want to embarrass you.... I do wish you had been more careful, though. Why didn't you cap it or something, Mau?"

I blushed. I'd always been the same with Dr. Campbell, ever since I was a Jarbaby, I guess. "I, that is we, thought it would get people thinking. I mean, we would have to buy the thing, and then any fool could put two and two together."

"You could have come to me," he assured us.

"But we didn't know you knew about it, then." And besides, we've been trying not to come to you, preferring the autodoc's watchful probe, but I couldn't tell him that.

"Well, I can understand Helen's concern. The important thing is your own feelings in the matter, what you

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want done. Dirac?"

"It seems obvious: abort the child quickly and avoid any publicity." I hated him for saying that. People have killed for less.

"Maura?" Campbell continued, nodding to himself.

"I'm not having an abortion, Kennet. I want this child, no matter what I have to go through." A big argument with Dirac before we went to bed had shaken my resolve slightly, but I wasn't about to let it show.

"You want my opinion?" Dirac said yes. I ignored the question, knowing full well we'd get it anyway. "First let me say that I can imagine exactly what Helen has said. I'm glad to see I didn't create a pair of yellow streaks, too chicken to get things out in the open early on.... But I have to side with Mau. I can't see that it will help to get rid of the child. The truth is bound to leak out, and then you'll be faced with accusations of guilt and shame to add to incest. Dirac, don't you see that to abort the child simply shows how guilty you feel?"

And my resolve came flooding back. It seemed almost unreal to have someone on my side.

Dirac grunted childishly and cut out of the conversation by starting on the dishes, stretching the umbilical to its full in order to reach the drainer.

It takes a lot of effort to ignore someone who is never more than three meters away from you, especially when you need each other's cooperation even to go to the toilet. Dirac managed it by announcing his needs to the nearest wall and hoping I would comply. Most of the time I would, because if he started to leave the room and I didn't follow suit, I'd get a nasty twinge of pain in my abdomen. It didn't help relations, either. But on occasion I would be reading or working, and he would sullenly announce that he needed to relieve himself.

"Have a little consideration for me, will you?" I implored him.

"As soon as you return the compliment, sure." And that was that, end of exchange. The umbilical was about as thick as a decent climber's rope and knobbed with ugly knots of gristle and quite tough — but I thought I could hack my way through it with a sharp knife from the kitchen. For three days I worked hard on my then-current project, some programs for the Artificial Intelligence Labs at Stanford, and in my spare time I drooled over schemes to sever relations with my pig-headed brother. If only I could find out exactly what was wrong with me, perhaps I could develop a new technique for dealing with it artificially. Then I could cut free from Dirac and lead a normal life. But the library or records I could access through my terminal had no information on us, and the autodoc was useless, and I daren't ask Campbell.

Besides, I didn't really want to kill

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my brother, which would be the result of cutting the umbilical. Mutually supportive parasites, I suppose, making up for each other's biological inabilities. I couldn't murder him, even if I could find some way to become self-supportive. I love my brother.

But his continuing rejection of my desire to actually bear this child that was now steadily growing inside me was damn near killing me. I wanted him to be happy about it, able to share the experience with me, and while he continued to be angry and hateful towards it I could not get much pleasure from the situation, either. I wanted him to be near me and hold me and talk about our child with me, but all he did was practice on the beautiful old Bechstein we'd restored, sometimes hitting the keys so hard that his fingers were red raw when he finished.

On the fourth day of the feud Dr. Campbell returned and, surprise surprise, Helen was with him, too. He came in smiling, and she wore an expression of utter, resigned contempt. I had to pull Dirac away from his piano so that I could let them in, and he virtually ignored Campbell, bringing up the rear as we trooped into the large lounge. The snow had completely covered the patio now and was inching its way up the patio door. It wasn't snowing at the moment, and I could see that mottled white carrying right across the canyon. It was the first time I had seen it like that since I was about seven. On that occasion Dirac had built a two-man sled while I watched, and we had gone careening off down gentle slopes at the canyon's mouth. It seemed unlikely we'd be doing that today.

"I — I think I owe you an apology," Helen said, trying to look gracious.

"Yes, I think you do," I snapped.

"I suppose it was too much to ask you to abstain from sex. Dr. Campbell has explained that you would have had difficulty finding partners.... I can appreciate that, now, and..." And she couldn't go on. It was obvious that she still did not like what had happened and wanted to wash her hands of the entire thing. Campbell, bless him, wasn't about to let her do that. Finally, she regained enough composure to go on."And after talking with Dr. Campbell, I have decided to let you both make up your own minds about what to do now."

"I pointed out to Helen that it was none of her damn business," Campbell offered, meaning it as light relief. For once his humor fell on stony ears. Helen gave him a killing black look.

"Right." I turned to my brother. "Dirac."

"I only want to do what's best all round."

"I doubt if it's possible to please everyone, but abortion creates as many problems as it tries to solve, as I pointed out the other day."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then, glancing at me, he said, "All right. Forget abortion." That was

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another thing about my brother: he had no stamina. Oh, I knew I shouldn't say that, but he had always seemed more of a pacifist than I.

Relief showed on Campbell's face as he said, "Right. Now the thing to do is announce this officially in a carefully worded bulletin. We'll make it seem important — after all, what kind of kid might two born geniuses bear? The whole point is to draw attention away from the circumstances surrounding the birth — sorry, conception." He turned to each of us in turn, looking for agreement, then went on. "I think we can leave the announcement for a few weeks.... Now, is there anything else to be covered before I leave? I've got a busy day."

No one could think of anything else, so he got up to leave, followed by Helen, who was keeping very quiet. As we escorted them out to the door, Campbell stopped and turned back. "Have you ever thought of combining your talents, working together?"

"We thought about it once, ages ago. Why?" I asked.

"Now might be a good time to give it a whirl." And then he was gone, trudging through the thick snow to his car.

When I closed the door, Dirac was wearing a sheepish look I hadn't seen on him in years. I went to him and we embraced. "I'm sorry," he said, softly rubbing the small of my neck.

"Me, too. I think Campbell is right, we should try working together."

"But where do we begin?"

A very good question: How to mix maths and computers with musical genius? "Well," I began theatrically, "first we go for a walk in the snow, and then I'd like a vacation. How's that sound?"

The house was filled with laughter for the first time in quite a while as we rushed to get our warm rags on and lace up our boots. Then we slid open the patio doors, not caring a hoot about the pile of snow that tumbled in onto the carpet, and made our way across the thickly covered patio, hand in hand to the narrow steps that led to a path through the pine trees we had planted years ago at a great cost added to by the irrigation plant needed to keep them healthy in the arid terrain. Today they were like a horde of white ogres, a silent group witness to our love.

It was good to be together again. Dirac said he had been stupid and pig-headed. I said I should have tried to talk to him, discuss things like the adults we were supposed to be. Making up was never a one-way process, and when you knew you were going to be with that person for the rest of your life it was an important part of your responsibility. It was doubtful we could have gotten a divorce, even if we had wanted one.

I did love Dirac, but I often wished we had a bit more privacy than three meters of ugly cord allow.

As we walked we discussed ideas

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for our joint project. It had to be something that no other partnership could produce, something that was uniquely ours. It was obvious that I would have to learn a lot about compositional techniques, and Dirac needed some schooling in technology. But first we would take a holiday.

All serious talk finally broke down when Dirac suddenly scooped a great handful of powdery snow and flung it in my face. I pushed him playfully, and soon we were tumbling around in the thick white blanket, trying to smother each other with wads of snow and choking on mouthfuls of the alien stuff before it melted to nothingness.

First stop was Europe, where Dirac showed a remarkable facility for mastering the local tongues. *C'est une* building for *manging le* food, he proclaimed as we entered a small café in Paris, and looked hurt as I collapsed into a nearby seat laughing. Later we were almost arrested by humorless *gendarmes* for spraying goo-bubbles off the Eiffel Tower, where they floated down and burst into a sticky matting in the hair of passers-by below.

Beating a hasty retreat, we crossed the Channel into Southampton. Luckily Dirac is quite proficient at *parlais Anglais*. However, when it comes to catching trains he leaves something to be desired; jumping on what we thought was the afternoon run for London, we stashed our luggage in an empty compartment and settled down for the short ride. It wasn't till we hurtled through Victoria Station and into the Newtunnel which shunted northbound traffic under the city that we decided to check the actual destination. We fed our ticket into the slot in the compartment door and stared at the readout.

"Well," I said, "I've never been to Edinburgh anyway." A few phone calls rerouted our hotel reservation and Hertz booking.

Edinburgh was a beautiful city in the great Celtic tradition, with great graystone buildings dominating the older parts of town, not least of which was the Royal residence with its watchtowers overlooking the surrounding countryside. Thankfully, this great city had been little touched by the bombs which had savaged so much of the country not too long ago. There was an old gag about all Scots being called *Jimmeh*. It was no myth.

In Moscow we were given a guided tour of the Brezhnev Space Museum. I had never seen any of the old Apollo or Mercury capsules, but the Soyuz and Salyut craft looked primitive, not to say cramped. I have often since wondered what it was like to be an astronaut or cosmonaut during those early pioneering days. Too risky, I thought. I had been less enthusiastic about including Russia on our holiday plan, but was glad Dirac insisted. For all the stories we heard, they were people, just like the rest of us. Their econ-

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omy was a bit tipsy at the time, so we didn't stay long because of the food shortages.

Tokyo was fun, even though I found the people either serious or high. Again we were given celebrity treatment and were taken to the world premiere of Boccelli's new opera. I found it rather bland, and even Dirac admitted disappointment in the simplicity of the sets and music. But it served to get us thinking about our own project again.

Collapsing into bed later that evening, a little bleary from a long and exhausting day and not a few drinks, Dirac suddenly sobered. I watched him curiously through an alcohol-laden haze as he turned to face me with a perverse look of inspiration on his features.

"I want to tell the world what it feels like to be Dirac Solitas, tethered to Maumau. I am different from any other man alive, and I'm going to put it down in musical form. I — I...."

I knew what he meant. Here we were — famous, rich, pregnant, pissed, tired, and high — just like so many other human beings. But we were *different*. At every stage of our vacation, just like TV stars we were hounded by newstapers and photographers but with us it was different. They didn't want shots of us-at-the-airport and us-getting-out-of-the-cab; they were after us-playing-golf and us-coming-out-of-the-ladies-toilet on Tokyo shopping malls, recoiling the umbilical. Always shots of the umbilical emerging from our clothing at the waist. They kept pointing out our differences, our uniqueness, while all we wanted to do was ignore precisely that kind of thing and live like normal people.

But now I began to see that as the wrong way to approach it: we should use it to the full, make people aware that we lived outside the bounds of normal society. We had to say: sure, we both go to the toilet together; and yes, we have to follow each other there. And, as we can't find sex partners, like anyone else — would anyone screw *you* while your brother sat across the room and watched? — so we had to find our own solution. The problem was uniquely ours, so the resolution would be, too.

But we realized in that moment in a strange hotel room, you can't lecture people, they don't like it. We would have to use what was uniquely ours: a great gift for music and computer art — programming. We had to let that tell the world for us, and in doing so, bring the public to accept my pregnancy and our love.

Back home on the lip of Coldwater Canyon, we spent the day unpacking our things and arguing over where we should display various mementos we had bought in our travels. But it was all in fun, really. For the previous twenty-one years of our lives we had been trying to ignore the umbilical as

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much as we could, had tried to live like other people. It had been hard work and not all that successful. Now we could be ourselves, at long last. *We were walking on the clouds.*

Then we prepared a gorgeous meal based on a recipe given to us by a kindly French chef. We dialed the lights low, and Dirac wanted to bring in a Moog and set it to auto, but there was something I wanted to watch on the cube. "How romantic," he sneered.

Maybe not, but it turned out to be very worthwhile. It was a science program on one of the specialist cable channels I subscribed to. They were exploring the possibilities of projecting holo images out of the plastic cube. They had developed a projector which resembled two large dinner plates separated by about eight feet of good old-fashioned air. In the demonstration they projected a white line between the plates, and the line was only about four feet long. The problem was constructing complex images in three dimensions. Basically a computer problem, the designer maintained.

When we finally went to bed we were tipsy on claret and made love, very slowly, ignoring the knot of the cord between us.

The following morning I called the designer of the projector widget featured in the previous night's show. Finally, a middle-aged man's face filled the screen, smiling politely. He recognized me instantly, which was nice.

"How can I help you, Miss Solitas?" he inquired.

"I was very interested in your projector on the cube last night, Herr Haustein," I began.

"Oh, Eduard, please. Alas, the device is still in its infancy."

"Yes. I think I may be able to help with the computer problem." And his bold Germanic grin grew wider as I explained what I had in mind.

When I hung up, Dirac asked, "How are you going to find time to fit that in with our project to also work on?"

"Dirac, I think we can make great use of such a projector. And I know I can solve the programming, it's a cinch." He relaxed at my assurance, and we went to set up the mass of equipment that had just been delivered to our studio, adjoined to the house. Yes, we were completely self-contained, had to be when we tried to cut ourselves off from everyone else and pretend to be just like them.

Ever since we were twelve Dirac had been making a mint from the royalties on his discs and tapes. In all that time he had never performed live on stage. His scores and lighter tunes had been performed by many of the world's greatest orchestras and keyboard players. For this new work it would all change. We would perform this one live in the fifty-thousand-seat auditorium in Washington, D.C., the Bimillenium Complex. Dirac decided not to involve any other musicians, but play the entire performance him-

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self with more than a little help from my computers. I also had full control of creating visual tracks. At least that was how it started, but we soon saw the madness of separation and did everything jointly.

For weeks I immersed myself in work, learning all there was to know about music synthesis, Fourier series, harmonic selection patterns, even integral descriptions and differential equation patterns. I learned all the mathematical models for generating, altering, and controlling sounds and the ways of getting the computers to tie it all together in a usable format. But, because our work was so closely tied, I found it difficult to work while Dirac composed and ranted. We began to work in shifts, sleeping and working alternate eight-hour periods. We would eat together at the end of each period and discuss what we had achieved. Then, when we were a month into it and halfway there, the prototypes from Haustein arrived. I hadn't even given it a thought since calling Haustein and offering my help. With the hardware arrived a small team of technicians who, thankfully, spoke excellent English. To my surprise, Dirac was relieved.

"I can have a rest, for a while, so you can get this out of the way," he explained. "And do some reading I haven't had time for recently."

So while I shifted from audio to visual synthesis, Dirac took up a terminal in my workshop and read and slept on the couch I had installed for him long ago.

I loved my brother. I even liked being with him, most of the time. It had often been very difficult when we were younger. There were times when I wanted to go roller skating with some other girls who were at the hospital each time we went there for checkups with Dr. Campbell and Prof. Pele, but it wasn't something that appealed to Dirac. He would point out that if one of us fell the other might go shooting on until the umbilical was fully stretched and we might get hurt. "Just 'cause you're no good," I taunted. And times when I wanted to be plain alone to think, go for a walk or swimming on my own. When Helen lived at home she used to get uptight if we undressed in plain sight of each other. "Use the damn screen, that's what it's for," she would yell. On many occasions I got off my stool at my terminal and yelled in Dirac's ear to stop practicing because I couldn't concentrate.

I was a very temperamental child, and both Dirac and Helen had a lot to put up with.

But there were other times when it was like magic being with him. If he fell and cut his knee, I would always be on hand to comfort and hug him, and he'd do the same for me when I fell. And when our favorite pop tunes came on the radio, we could join hands and dance until we collapsed into a breathless pile on the kitchen tiles. And more

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recently I held his hand as we walked up on stage to receive our doctorates.

When we were really young, we drove our tutors crazy until they had a soundproof partition constructed in the study with a gap in it for umbilical. We hated that; it was so restricting and it spoiled our fun. Because we were almost identical when we were young — right down to skin, hair and eye color — if we dressed the same our tutors couldn't tell which one of us was which, and I spent far too much time with a tutor who thought I was Dirac, trying to play scales, while Dirac infuriated my computer science tutor by jamming the terminal with a problem I had shown him involving the root of minus one. Once we even put on each other's clothes but I think that was going a little too far. Helen slapped our legs for that little stunt.

We were darling children, and Helen had it easy.

Dirac had a lot to put up with when we reached puberty. Hormonal changes I was undergoing seemed at first to have adverse effects on him. Then he had to start a series of testosterone injections, and a filter was installed in the umbilical so that I didn't suddenly sprout a hairy chest or something like that. However, Dirac still seemed affected by my hormones and to this day had slightly more in the chest department than most males. But even everyday things had more effect on him than on me. He once cut his leg while whittling an arrow with a craft knife, keeled right over, blacked out. And he always got a headache when I had a period, poor thing.

I sometimes wished all children had had a childhood like mine, for a while at least. They would learn how to tolerate people they disliked and how to see someone else's point of view. But more important, they would get an insight into how people around them felt and thought.

We became sexually aware very young and matured a lot more quickly than most people do (Helen was one of the least mature people I'd ever met).

But I often wished that I didn't have that damn cord entering me through my navel, intruding on my life every minute of every day. I would have liked to run a marathon, but I knew that Dirac would never make it. Skydiving was out, too. But it helped to know that Dirac had limitations, too, for all his manual dexterity and creative talent.

We had to learn how to share, early on, and I couldn't see any way we could survive without that cooperation. I couldn't even pee if Dirac refused to walk a few short meters to the can.

"I am amazed at how quickly you solved it," Haustein said, beaming exultantly into the screen. "And of course you can use the projector for your concerts. I think it would be a tremendous way to launch it."

"And think of the number of tapes

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of the show that we'll sell. All that free advertising for you. It's a marvelous machine, Herr — Eduard." It had taken me two months to design all the hardware and programs needed to construct solid 3-D objects with Haustein's revolutionary projector. By the time we staged our concert, the new, improved projector would be ready, and that would be really something special.

Meanwhile, Dirac had been sinking into a depression. It became routine to wake up to one of his foul moods, and he would drag me up to breakfast, ignoring me while I explained how my work was progressing. Then he would sit at his terminal reading or go straight to sleep. I hated it when he had one of those sulky moods; it dragged me down from the heights I reached when my work was going well.

He brightened slightly at the news that I had completed the projector work for Haustein. He could get back into his studio and get on with his composing as soon as the technicians were packed up and gone.

We kept to the shift system for some time because it seemed to be working well. Each time I woke he would have typed a fresh set of instructions into my terminal for me. His studio was large enough to accommodate a forty-strong string section, but by now it was very cramped with all the various racks of hardware we needed: digital wave-form generators, disk drives and chips, VDUs, keypads, instrument keyboards and mixing consoles.

We had decided upon a 3-D sound stage, which meant octophonic speaker setups to give correct placing of each element. In lay terms that meant the equivalent of eight full orchestras. Don't let me ever say that my brother was not ambitious.

I had the job of designing each instrument sound from scratch: that meant the basic Fourier-derived wave form plus any combination of a mere 256 harmonics.

"Don't forget the visual work," I pointed out to Dirac at breakfast one day during the fifth month of pregnancy.

"I've been thinking about that," he said around a mouthful. "I think we can let the computer do most of the work there. I have designed very distinctive themes, and by correct programming we should be able to let a computer take them and turn them into visual images. It would develop exactly in time with the music, and we could edit it as was needed during rehearsals."

"Dirac, what's the matter?" He should have been overflowing with enthusiasm as we approached the completion of our greatest, most powerful statement. Instead, he had a face as long as an ore carrier.

"Nothing really, Mau. I'm just a bit tired, that's all."

We made our way back to the studio, and Dirac was soon asleep on the couch as I took my place amongst the acres of hardware. The concert was

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scheduled for six weeks before our child was due, and I still had *masses* to do. It wasn't that the work was particularly hard, there was just so much of it. The number of variations on any single instrument sound was enough to defy the imagination to attempt to name a fraction of them. I assembled a list of the best fifteen and let Dirac make the final choices.

"Maura?" Dirac began as we finished dumping the dishes in the drainer. "My knowledge of genetics is pretty slim, but will our baby be all right?"

Sweejeez! I hadn't thought of that, not once in five months had I given any thought to the small matter of heredity. Now I knew what had been eating Dirac: he was worried about our child. *Our* child.

"I appreciate your concern, and frankly I hadn't thought about it myself," Dr. Campbell said, wearing one of those awfully sincere looks they teach you at medical school. "But," he brightened slightly, "I think that, as you two are the product of a single cell splitting, your child will be a recombination. I think you have nothing to worry about, but we'll watch things carefully, closer to time. In the meantime get on with that concert piece. We're all looking forward to it immensely."

My breasts grew a lot fuller with time, but Dirac said he disliked the rising blue veins. We hadn't had any time for lovemaking recently, which was just as well, my genitals were very sensitive now. I began to tire more easily and I began to eat slower and less in an attempt to cut the heartburn. Helen told me on the phone that she had begun shopping for the baby. I'd secretly been dialing up babywear catalogs, too. The autodoc kept informing us that we were pregnant, although it wouldn't tell us any more. Dr. Campbell offered to do a test to determine the child's sex, but we'd rather wait and be surprised. It was less convenient, but more fun.

"I think we should stop the shift system now," Dirac said as I slipped on one of my newly made maternity gowns. All our clothing had to be specially made to facilitate the umbilical. Dresses were the biggest problem, having to be split to the waist on one side with either buttons or a zip to hold them closed around the umbilical.

"Sure," I said and noticed that he looked a little flushed. I thought he suffered more with our pregnancy than any other man ever had. We both had a craving for fried chicken and boiled rice, of all things. At the moment we were into juicy fruits. He even suffered slight morning sickness when I had it badly. I wondered if he would get contractions....

I felt more of a woman than I had since puberty. I guessed that pregnancy had that effect on most women. It was a very primal, animal experience.

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It made me feel slow, sloppy-minded at times, dumpy, clumsy, sexless — and I loved it, every sweet moment of it.

"I hope we have a girl," Dirac proclaimed a few days ago. I thought I took that as a compliment.

We moved into a hotel suite in Washington, close to the auditorium. All the equipment had been shipped and was waiting for us when we arrived. The projection equipment wasn't there, and I couldn't get in touch with Haustein. I'd been giving some thought to naming our child but my mind was so overworked that I couldn't get past ex-presidents, and most of them had been shot or something equally nice. Dirac said we should go for something more symbolic, and Helen wanted to call the babe Kennet Pele, if it were a boy.

We went shopping in the downtown covered malls, followed by many staring and pointing faces. Dirac had the umbilical coiled over his shoulder and held my hand — something we never had the courage to do a while before. In one sense I guessed we were national celebrities because of our origins, and people had every right to stare — their tax had brought us into the world, after all. On one occasion a middle-aged couple came up to us, and the woman took my free hand and pressed it between hers, and they wished us luck — and then they were gone, smiling. We were having a pleasant time, thankfully taking a break from the hectic preparations, until I came over faint in a shoe shop and had to be given a seat and a glass of water.

Helen flew in during the afternoon and took us to dinner. I left most of my meal, preferring to pick at the bowl of fruit near at hand. I was glad Helen finally had accepted things as they were, and I decided that she wasn't a bad sort, really.

The Bimillenium Memorial Auditorium was a vast complex, combining several small art galleries, restaurants frequented by the trendy set that feeds on the Washington subculture, a large tape library of classic movies and shows, and exhibition bars. Then there was the main cavernous auditorium. When I walked onto the stage for the first time I almost expected to see someone hang gliding beneath the great vaulted roof, so high above us.

Work crews were already busy erecting gantries at eight separate sites around the hall which would suspend the banks of speakers. Other men were assembling our stage equipment according to a plan we had worked out back at the house. All the instrument keyboards and computer interfacing hardware were arranged in a wide semicircle with the bulk of the equipment stacked up behind, in neat rows that allowed me access for interwiring and checking. A pair of scaffold towers was put up on either side of the front of the stage to accommodate the holo projection plates. Finally, at the rear of the stage the main bank of

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amplifiers was installed along with helium cooling and a high-tension power line; it took a lot of power to fill such a vast hall with sound. In the semicircle two long benches were bolted down in front of the control array.

Although we had virtually finished the creative process, many points had been impossible to predict in advance, being dependent on the acoustics of the auditorium. The concerts were now only a week away, and the holo equipment had still not arrived. I began to make alternative, less satisfactory arrangements, but Herr Haustein arrived the following day with the new, enlarged projector. He was a tall, elegant man, poised and confident, which made all the more apparent his disconcertion when faced with Dirac, me, and the umbilical. His smile drooped noticeably.

"Ugly, isn't it?" Dirac quipped, good-humoredly.

"I must appologize, I didn't mean to stare...."

"Go ahead. We're used to it now. We need it, so, I guess, we don't mind," I assured him. "And it has given us ... interesting perspectives."

"Yes. I was just not ready for the full reality of it."

I think a while ago we might have raved at anyone who showed they had even noticed it, back when we tried to ignore it ourselves. Now we wanted people to notice it — it was ours!

Then, with that little formality over with, we were down to business. I spent the last three days before the premiere programming and reprogramming computers so that all the holo images would be manipulated automatically. CBS sent in a crew who set up a recording studio in the orchestra pit to capture the whole event for release on the home video market, from which most of our income would come. Haustein's crew set up the projector, and then, the morning of the premiere of *Life on the Tether*, the workmen were all finished, packed up and gone, and Dirac and I were alone on the expansive stage, now cluttered with more hardware than was needed to run a small orbital industrial plant. From my bench I could see eight VDU screens, plus the small holo projector I needed because I couldn't see the main unit, could punch up information through six terminals plus the main mixing console to my left.

By lunchtime we had finished our sound check, and Dirac tapped the main power switch over to standby, and put his arm around my waist. "I've changed my mind," he said quietly into my ear. "Can we go home?" Then he scooped me up with his arms and carried me backstage. I wouldn't have credited him with the strength.

"What was that for?" I asked when he put me down on a couch in our rest room.

"Just checking that I could do it."

"But we've still got tons to do," I insisted as he dragged me to one of the restaurants for lunch. "We haven't run

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through the holos yet."

"Have you set the basic images and parameters in the way we decided, tying them in with the themes and tempos and all that?" he asked and began ordering.

"Well, yes."

He finished ordering for us both and said, "Then there's nothing to fret over, is there? As long as you switch on the computer and I remember what to play, we'll be laughing. You'll be monitoring it so you can change it if it starts wandering, but I've every confidence it'll be okay.... Now Kennet Campbell is coming over this afternoon to give you a checkup. We don't want you getting faint or sleepy during the performance. I'll check things over while you relax. I'll have them pull a couch onstage for you."

Kennet met us in the rest room and helped us drag a couch onstage and station it behind the bench where Dirac positioned himself at my terminals.

"Don't mess with anything, those programs are very critical," I warned him, childishly. They were just as much his work as mine and he had no need to alter them. Kennet pushed me back gently on the couch and began examining me with his ultrascope. When he finished he nodded his satisfaction with the way my pregnancy was developing, and insisted on giving me a three-hour sleepjab. "See you after the show," he said as I went under.

* * *

I woke in the small rest room. Helen was there, talking to Dirac in quiet tones. They seemed to be arguing. I couldn't make out much of what was said.

"—but it's not fair that—" he hissed.

"It'll do no good."

"—it's my duty."

"Leave it to—"

Then they noticed I was awake, and ground to a sudden halt. Dirac had a sinister, guilty look, and Helen seemed angry with him. "What is it? What's wrong?" I inquired, sitting up slowly, carefully. I felt a little stiff and more dumpy than usual.

"Nothing, we were just having a little squabble, as usual," Dirac explained in a light tone that didn't work.

"I was trying to knock some sense into his thick skull ... Too late for ... Well, I'd better grab my seat before some schmuck hijacks it." And she left.

"What was all that exit smiling about?" I demanded.

"We had a slight disagreement, nothing much. I really don't want to bother you with it before the show. Come on, we'd better get ready."

"Feeling nervous?"

"Yeah.... You?"

"You bet."

Dirac went to a small closet and brought out the hangers and boxes with our clothes. "How do like this?" he asked, opening a small box. He drew out a long chain of self-luminous links.

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"What's that for?"

"Decoration. As we are about to glorify our way of life, I thought we might attract a bit of notice for the umbilical that started the whole thing." He began winding the chain around the umbilical.

"Gimmacky, but I like it. Thank you, honey. That was a nice thought."

He finished winding the chain and fastened it at either end with gold braid. Just as we finished changing, the stylist arrived to arrange my hair. I was still a bit sleepy, and Dirac fixed coffee for us all.

Then it was time. Two officials in elegant shot silk suits came to collect us and escort us through the waiting press into the wings. Willow Parsal, the manager of the auditorium, followed us through the newstapers and issued instructions for the PA system to be powered up. Then she took a microphone from a rack and walked onto the stage, disappearing through the frontal curtain. The rumbling chatter of the audience set butterflies in the pit of my stomach. I looked nervously at Dirac, who was no encouragement with a ripe frown lining his forehead. Parsal's voice boomed.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The audience fell silent. "Once in a while an artist of overpowering talent comes to us and sweeps back barriers, creating work of such distinction that appeals to all tastes, an artist who revitalizes us in our everyday lives. Tonight we have two such artists. Very special people. Complications at birth forced doctors to join twins Maura and Dirac Solitas by an umbilical cord, and that's how they've had to live their lives. Now they are set to have a child, and this has forced them to combine their special skills to put together a work that sheds light on what it has been like to live the unique life that they have experienced." The curtains began to sweep back, revealing the stage to the peering eyes of fifty thousand people who had come to see the *Jarbaby spectacle*, as the *Washington Post* had called it.

Dirac took my hand and we walked out into view. Parsal went on, "Friends, join with me in welcoming Maura and Dirac Solitas." We waved in acknowledgment of the applause and settled ourselves before our equipment as Parsal left the stage and the house lights went down. A steady *thrum* built up as the words *Life on the Tether* materialized in the air between the widely separated projector plates, wavered and dissolved as the hum receded in the rear lower speakers.

I focused my attention on the small projector mounted in the center of my field of vision as the first movement began with eerie chimes echoing behind a reedy, surreal flute. This was Dirac's movement. A single blue line on the screen began to oscillate and slowly transformed itself into a spiral section of what looked like DNA. I had not programmed this! My fingers flew over the keypad, trying to call up my orig-

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inal designs, written into the memory only yesterday. I was informed that the file I requested did not exist. I retyped the access codes. Nothing changed. Someone had reprogrammed the visual cues, and I could not do a damn thing about it — I didn't know the correct file codes. And I had other things to do, so I turned my attention to other tasks and prayed that it would work out.

My eyes kept wandering back to the holo display. Now two human forms momentarily embraced, orbited a pumping heart. And I couldn't take my eyes from the images. One of the forms grew disfigured and clutched at the dissolving heart. The music thundered around me, themes stringing together, segueing. Violins took off in the 3-D sound field and a terrible wail rose in counterpoint. I glanced over at Dirac, who was totally engrossed in making his fingers comply with the mental pictures he was forming. I had never heard the full musical score before, only fragments.

The first movement faded and the second — mine — opened, very similar to Dirac's first, to begin with, then it became lighter, airy.

As the final movement, bringing us together, began with what seemed a cat-and-dog fight set to music, images pulsed hypnotically in perfect time with the sound. My hands performed tasks instinctively.

A knife flashed, dividing the umbilical.

One form fell to the floor, writhing in agony as a trumpet was murdered, slowly. The screen pulsed and seemed to expand to fill my mind, washing through me a tide of pain. For an hour the music and holo weaved a rich tapestry of truth, revealing a painful secret that suddenly made sense. We laughed, shared, loved, hated, screamed at each other, ran, walked, and danced.

When it finally receded in the final triumphant notes, I knew what Dirac and Helen had been arguing about. I knew why I could not access the visual files; Dirac had changed them while I slept in the afternoon. I knew why my home terminal would not give me medical records and histories. The knowledge turned me to jelly as the thunderous applause filled the vast hall. Dirac was at my side, helping me to my feet. He put his arm around me and picked me off the floor, carried me to the front of the stage. I fought back the tears that wanted to drown me. We received a standing ovation, but it meant nothing to me. Dirac had woven a horrifying image in amidst the celebration of our unity. No one else would catch it, but it hit with the force of a meteor.

When we finally got offstage I was recovered enough to be angry. As we entered the backstage corridor, Kennet Campbell rushed to meet us with Helen. He began to rant on his congratulations, but I cut him off, demanding, "Is it true?"

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"What?" he asked, recoiling at my unfathomable anger.

"I want the truth. Is one of us perfectly healthy, and the other totally dependent?"

"I told you not to do this," Helen criticized Dirac.

"I had to."

"Yes," Campbell said finally. "I let it slip to Dirac a couple of months ago, in a phone conversation when you were sleeping. One of you has no functional enzymate or immunological system. That means that, left to your own devices, one of you would have died shortly after birth."

The following day the rest of the story came to light. Campbell and Pele had programmed the division of the initial cell, hoping for two genuises for the price of one, but their limited knowledge of how the cell would split became apparent when analysis showed that the pituitary and subpituitary glands in one of the embryos was badly formed and only partially functional.

"I thought immunology worked on a cellular level," I said.

"It does, but there are local trigger and control centers located throughout the body, and they're ultimately under control of the pituitary gland. We decided early on that we would never tell you this because of the tensions it would create between you. All the records are kept in secure files at the state university. I'm sorry that it had come to light now, this is a very difficult time for both of you. Obviously I won't tell you which of you has the defective glands," he explained in conclusion.

"Why not just destroy the defective embryo? Surely you could have settled for one genius?" Dirac asked bitterly.

"That's just it, we couldn't be sure that we had even one genius, it was quite hit or miss. We couldn't afford to destroy the defective child for fear it was the more intelligent of the two. Parabiosis was our only solution."

"So what you're saying is that one of us could have lived a perfectly normal life, but instead you chose to play God. I suddenly hate you, *Doctor* Campbell. You stink." I turned away and choked back tears again.

Life on the Tether was a smash success. The recording sold in the millions. "A splendid insight into their singular existence," raved the critic in the *New York Times*. But I never got any pleasure out of performing it the other nights that were booked. I never dared monitor the holo, too scared that I'd get bitten again.

When it was all over we flew home. Things were a bit tense between us, Dirac told me that he couldn't keep the truth from me, but equally couldn't come right out with it, so he had reworked the music and holo hoping that I'd see what he was driving at. I got over the initial shock, but it was still very hard to accept. I kept thinking

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about the sort of life one of us could have had, had Campbell not been so greedy.

I wanted to know which of us it would have been. I was too scared to find out. Sometimes the guilt welled inside me and I wanted to hide from my brother: I hated to think I might be a burden on anyone. I turned to our childhood in a morbid search for clues. We had almost died when we were five, with flu! It was easy to see why: only one immune system to combat the virus. After that we were regularly given shots to fend off infection. By then we had begun to show our intelligence, and the doctors wanted to protect their investment.

It was the same with Dirac.

Yet, at other times we were closer than we had ever been. The hurt ebbed away as we began to realize that what we had going for us was far too rich to give up. I told the doctors to do whatever might be necessary to ensure that our child lived, if he inherited the defective genes.

When I finally found out who the parasite was (the horrid thing was that parasite was precisely the right term), apart from the initial shock I put the evil thought into my mind's strongbox and locked it there, hoping it would never surface again.

We lay side by side in the delivery room. As another contraction wracked across me, I seemed to cease existence in my head and became a single animal response to the most primal urge I ever felt. It had complete control, and I screamed low in my throat. PUSH, push, *pump and push.* Sweat streamed over my face and from my armpits. Dirac excitedly yelled encouragement. Nurses flapped around me, unnoticed. My eyes did not register the watery light. I pushed, rammed, pumped. I swore to myself, bit my lower lip, almost drawing blood. The pain was glorious, sweet, and instinctive. When it was finally over, it was too soon; I felt robbed.

For two days we did nothing except eat and visit our son in the incubation tent as often as they would allow us. I wanted to reach in and touch him, but the knowledge that to remove him from his insular environment was enough to sign his death certificate was too impeding. Campbell was waiting for him to gain a little strength so that he would be better prepared for the extensive surgery he faced. Poor little rascal. Then they wheeled him into the operating room and opened him up as they had Dirac and myself twenty-one years before. Finally, we were taken into the operating room and put under so that they could join our son's umbilical to mine.

Campbell had explained the day after the birth that our still-unnamed son had inherited the defective gene, it was too deeply routed in the basic makeup of the DNA. He also inadvertently suggested that we start thinking about having a daughter. Then I had it. It was Dirac my brother, brilliant

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musician, parasite. The defective gene must be carried by the male; a daughter would be perfectly healthy, being basically me.

I could have run that marathon, roller skated with those kids. I could have sky-dived. All it needed was a quick, decisive swoop of a sharp blade. I had no need of my brother to live. I could be free, take a lover.

For an instant I was filled with an urge to kill Dirac. I didn't need him, why should he hold me back? I was *strong*, I needed no man to lean on.

We rarely spoke until after the operation. I woke in bed, with brother and son in cots either side of me. I woke thinking: *And then there were three.* I was a changed woman. I saw myself as the nucleus of a small but growing tribe. The all-giving earth mother, protecting my offspring, nourishing them. It was a very humbling thought and I no longer hated Dirac.

We left the hospital a few days later. I'd never felt so proud as when I emerged from the hospital carrying my child in my arms for all the newstapers and photographers and onlookers to see. I wanted to tell them to go screw; the looks of wonder and revulsion of the tether on many of the faces that peered at us filled me with laughter.

Things were pretty good with Dirac now. We went out a lot more, into town, and had a small but expanding group of close friends. I'd told him about how I felt in the hospital. He

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looked very solemn while I talked; then he told me about how he felt. I wanted to cry. He embraced me and we kissed, with a hunger born of fear. We had each other again. I know he'll hold me when I'm down, pick me up again. We'll start a new child soon. Apparently there was a new drug which could increase the chance of conceiving a girl; we'll use that. Then our son can have his own life partner. I didn't get the urge to kill Dirac anymore. I'd like to be a free woman, sometimes, but what I had got going was far more valuable. It was a pity we needed a physical tether to bring us this close, to make us break down the barriers between individuals. I honestly couldn't imagine a full life without my parasitic partner.

We decided to call sonny boy Kennet, after all. We took turns carrying him when we went for walks in the canyon. When he gets older we might take him catfish hunting.

I have no secrets from Dirac, and now he has none from me. We have a good thing going here, and I'm glad to say that my son will have the same. People look down on us, though they have no right: we're far happier than most of them will ever be. Our children will be the luckiest guys in the world because they'll learn how to share. It won't be easy for them, and I'm glad. Everyone should hurt a little.

One of our friends recently asked what makes us so happy.

I said, "Get yourself a partner and perhaps one day you'll learn."

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Here is the touching and amusing story of how Kedrigern and his princess meet. When a wizard craves companionship, where does he find a suitable female? Over a mug of ale at a singles inn? It's a sticky problem.

Wizard Goes A-Courtin'

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

Privacy was wonderful. Solitude was sweet. But as the end of his second year of isolation in the little cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain drew near, Kedrigern began to feel the pangs of loneliness. He craved companionship.

He closed with a solid, dust-scattering *thoomp* the great book of spells before him. Reading about spells was all very well; one had to keep up, and there was still no end of things to learn; but how much more enjoyable to sit in the shade of an ancient oak with a pitcher of chilled ale and two frosty tankards, discussing the subtleties of spells and enchantments with a fellow wizard. But that was not to be. Not for a long time, certainly, and maybe never again.

Kedrigern sighed, and rose, and stood by his cluttered work table for a time, fingering the medallion that he still wore around his neck and thinking of his guild brothers. Vain, fidgeting Hithernils, and crusty old Conhoon, and clever Tristaver ... he missed them all. Of course, even now, he need only apologize and everything would be forgiven.

No! he thought angrily, banging his fist down on the work table, raising a small dust cloud and knocking a little silver bell from its place on the edge, to fall with a bright tinkle. If *they* apologize, everything will be forgiven. Principle is principle. They were wrong and he was right. But he was still lonely.

A hideous little creature came bounding into the chamber, its huge ears flapping, eyes rolling, tongue lolling. "Yah! Yah!" it cried, bouncing eagerly up and down.

Kedrigern was puzzled for a moment by his house-troll's presence, unsummoned. Then he noticed the fallen

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bell. "I didn't mean to ring, Spot, but as long as you're here, I'll have lunch. Just a slice of bread and some of the soft cheese. And a mug of ale. Bring it out under the oak," he said.

Spot whirled from the chamber, and the flapping of its huge feet dwindled down the hallway. Kedrigern followed the little troll out, carefully closing the door behind him, and started for the front yard.

Spot was useful, no question about that, but Spot was not company. It was an ideal servant: loyal, energetic, eager, and versatile. But all orders had to be literal and precise. Say simply, "Get me lunch, Spot," and there was a good chance of getting roast rat smothered in sautéed toadstools. Kedrigern recalled Spot's training period, and shuddered.

Outside, in the shade of the great oak, the air was cool. Kedrigern finished his bread and cheese, licked his fingers clean, sipped his ale, and evaluated the situation.

His work in temporal magic was getting him nowhere. He had managed to snatch a few small objects from other ages, but could not, as yet, be certain whence they came nor what their purpose might be. Further study was required. That meant a thorough search through the library, and that, in turn, practically necessitated the cataloging he had been putting off for so long. The counterspell for the daughter of Morgosh the Indulgent was completed, and need only be delivered. No other work was at hand.

Kedrigern thought of Morgosh, and his daughter Metalura, and frowned thoughtfully. Delivery of the counterspell would require a trip, but it would also give him a few days at Morgosh's castle, where the accommodations were first-rate. Morgosh was known for prompt and generous payment, but Kedrigern was not greatly concerned about that aspect of their dealings. A wizard seldom had difficulty collecting his debts.

Metalura had been a statue for nearly a year now. That was ample time for her to meditate on the need for good manners when dealing with witches. Good manners were about the only thing lacking in Metalura. She was a fine-looking woman, intelligent and clever; but she had a tongue like a flaying knife. Even the generous dowry offered by Morgosh could not bring suitors to his castle, and Metalura was no longer in the first blush of girlhood. Now, if she had added civility and gracious demeanor to her other attributes, she would be ...

Kedrigern set his mug down and pondered that, and his frown became a smile. His eyes brightened. A beautiful woman with a lively intelligence, civil, gracious, and hugely dowered; a grateful doting father who would grant any reward to the one who freed her from her spell; and a lonely wizard. The ingredients were perfect. Rubbing his hands together briskly, grinning as he had not grinned in a long time, he rose

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and called for his house-troll.

"There is packing to be done, Spot," he said when the little creature arrived. "I'm going away for a few days, and I'm leaving you in charge here. Keep the place tidy — I may not return alone." And humming to himself, he patted Spot on the top of its warty head and entered the house.

The journey to Mon Desespoir, the castle of Morgosh the Indulgent, was as bad as Kedrigern had anticipated, but no worse. Travel was not one of life's pleasures for Kedrigern. He sustained himself en route by thoughts of his triumphant return, a beautiful bride at his side, a dowry in his possession, and an escort of Morgosh's sturdiest guardsmen before and behind.

He arrived at Mon Desespoir in the afternoon of his eighth day on the road, having traveled by foot, mule, horse, cart, and wagon, as the opportunity offered. He was very dusty, and it was almost as uncomfortable to sit as to stand. But Morgosh the Indulgent received him at once, with all the enthusiasm he was capable of showing.

When they were alone in his state chamber, Morgosh sighed, gazed at the floor, and said, "Tell me the bad news at once, wizard. How much longer must my dear daughter remain locked in stone?"

"No longer than you wish, my lord Morgosh."

"Don't taunt me, wizard. If it were up to me, dear Metalura would be freed from her spell this very day."

"So she shall, then," said Kedrigern triumphantly, pulling a packet from his tunic and holding it aloft. "I have brought the counterspell!"

"Is it true?" Morgosh cried.

"Absolutely."

"Then let us go at once to the chamber where my Metalura stands! She will dine with us this very evening!" Morgosh exulted.

"Your Lordship, if I might have a few moments. ... I have traveled long and far. I'm covered with dust, and weary. If you would permit—"

"When my Metalura moves and speaks once more, you will bathe in asses' milk and go in silks and velvet, my honest Kedrigern," said Morgosh, seizing the wizard by the arm and dragging him toward a door. "But first, Metalura."

Morgosh pointed to a candlestick. Kedrigern took it up as Morgosh unlocked the door, locking it once again from the other side. They proceeded down a corridor, side by side, to a narrow flight of stairs. Morgosh took the light and led the way upward, to another locked door. Once inside, he returned the candlestick to Kedrigern.

"Light the torches," he said.

The wizard did so, and as torch after torch blazed up and the room filled with light, he saw the statue that rested on a pedestal at the center of the little chamber. All around, the walls

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were hung with weaponry, and pikes were stacked against the wall. Apparently, the room had originally been an armory.

Metalura stood fixed in gray stone. She stood in an attitude of alarm, her left hand at her breast, her right extended as if to ward off an impending danger. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted, her head tilted slightly backward, away from the unseen threat. The stone folds of her gown clung to a mature but slender and perfectly formed figure. She was exquisitely beautiful.

"Here she stands, Kedrigern. She's been like this for almost a year, my poor darling."

"How did it happen, my lord?"

"It was the work of malice, Kedrigern. Sheer malice. Someone put them up to it."

"Them?"

"The Drissmall sisters. Do you know them?"

"I've heard of them. They're well known for plagues and rashes, but I've never heard of them in connection with petrifaction. They must be branching out."

"Obviously a conspiracy," said Morgosh. "I had them here on business. While we were in conference, Metalura entered. I had no secrets from my dear daughter, and she had free run of the palace. She made an observation about the nose of one of the Drissmalls. When her sister objected, Metalura made unfavorable reference to the warts on her chin. You must understand, Kedrigern, that the Drissmalls are extremely unsightly individuals. My dear girl was saying no more than the plain truth."

"I understand."

"Well, to put it briefly, they turned her into stone.. As you see."

Kedrigern nodded, stroked his chin, and studied the petrified maid. "Did they say anything you remember? Your messenger was not clear on that point."

"Oh, they mumbled something. Typical witch talk. Hard to understand them, though. They haven't a single tooth among them. Terrible diction."

"Good enough to cast a very neat spell," Kedrigern said appreciatively. "I know something about petrifaction spells, and it's difficult enough just turning someone into a lump of stone. This is a beautiful piece of magic."

"You're not here to admire their handiwork, you're here to undo it!"

"Of a certainty, my lord Morgosh," Kedrigern said in a soothing tone. "But I must know all the facts. Did they say anything?"

"Some sort of jingle."

"Do you remember it?"

Reluctantly, Morgosh recited, "'Lovely lady, stand in stone, / Till you speak in milder tone.' Something like that."

"Anything more?"

"Not another word. They said that, and then they vanished into thin air before I could call my guards."

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"Mmm. ... That's a very straightforward spell. If I counter it, and free your daughter, she'll go right back to being a statue the first time she makes an unkind remark about anyone."

"My little girl was never unkind to a living soul, Kedrigern," said Morgosh, gazing with moist eyes on the figure that stood before them. "She was clever, and she never minced words. Had a great dedication to plain, blunt speaking, Metalura did. But she never insulted anyone who didn't deserve it."

Kedrigern was beginning to feel serious misgivings. Surely, her imprisonment in stone must have gentled Metalura's manners. But old ways die hard. A single relapse on her part might lose Kedrigern the entire reward and gain him the enmity of Morgosh. And probably the Drissmall sisters, as well. He was on very shifty ground.

"Well, when can you start?" Morgosh demanded.

"I can get to work right now. But I must warn you, under the terms of the spell, she might—"

"Yes, yes, I know, Kedrigern. Have no fear. My little girl will never say another word that even the most sensitive soul could take amiss. Now get to it."

Kedrigern got to it. Waving Morgosh back, he untied the packet containing the ingredients of the counterspell, and laid out two small pouches and a tiny leaden vial, tightly stoppered. He opened one pouch, which contained a red powder, and made a circuit of the room, stopping at each torch to toss a pinch of the powder into the flame. As a sharp scent began to fill the air of the chamber, he returned to his place before the statue, opened the second pouch and, mixing a pinch of the green powder in it with the red, dropped the mixture on the candle flame.

Billows of rich purple-blue smoke coiled forth from the tiny flame, and rolled like sluggish serpents about the floor of the room. Kedrigern walked once around the statue, repeating an incantation, forming figures in the air with the thick, ropy smoke. Setting down the candlestick, he opened the vial, and covering it with his finger, upended it. He touched the moistened fingertip to the statue's lips, eyelids, and wrists, then stepped back and quickly restoppered the vial.

At first, one might have thought it a trick of the smoke-filled air. But in a very little time, the flush of Metalura's cheek and the coral of her lips was unmistakable. Her hair turned from stony gray to white, to pale yellow, and at last to a rich gold. Her breast rose and fell with a deep breath. Her eyelids fluttered. She blinked, and moved, and at last she spoke.

"What did they to do me, Daddy?" she said in a voice like soft music, sleepily rubbing her hazel eyes.

"You were placed under a spell, dear girl. The Drissmall sisters turned you into a statue," Morgosh explained,

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looking adoringly upon her.

"You should have told me they were witches, Daddy," she said, pouting.

"There wasn't time, my treasure, It was all so very sudden."

"It certainly was. I should've guessed they were witches, I suppose. The nose on that fat one was—"

"Stop!" Kedrigern cried in a mighty voice, flinging his arms high. "Speak no more, lady!"

"Who's this?" Metalura asked coolly.

"I am Kedrigern, the wizard of Silent Thunder Mountain," said he with a bow and a flourish that shook loose the dust of the road that still lay heavily in the folds of his robes.

"You're a very pushy wizard, whatever you call yourself. What do you mean, coming into my presence dressed like that? You look—"

"Stop, my dearest child!" cried Morgosh. "You must not say another word!"

"To *him*?" Metalura said scornfully. "He looks like something you put up to keep the pigeons off my shoulders. I never saw such—"

A sharp *cling* resounded through the chamber, and Metalura stood in pale unweathered stone, hands on hips, head atilt, looking down in unfavorable judgment on all the world.

"What have you done?" Morgosh howled.

Indignantly, Kedrigern said, "I restored your daughter to normal. She managed to turn herself back into a statue. Don't blame me."

"You're all alike! You're all in this together!" Morgosh cried, in a growing rage. He dashed to the wall and wrenched free a large, very spiky morning star. Raising it high overhead. he charged at Kedrigern.

With no time for a protective spell, Kedrigern cast an instantaneous oblivion on the raging noble. Morgosh slowed, staggered, and then, gazing blankly at the wizard, dropped the morning star. He tottered in place for a moment, sagged, slumped to the floor, and stretched out supine on the flagstones.

The spell was a stopgap, and Kedrigern had to think fast. At Morgosh's first recovering groan, the wizard rushed to his side, loosened his tunic, and began to fan his face, inquiring with the greatest solicitude, "Is Your Lordship himself again? How does Your Lordship?"

Morgosh groaned again, heaved a deep sigh, and came wide awake. Sitting up, he exclaimed, "What happened? Something came over me ... a seizure ... a fit. ..."

"Understandable, in view of the terrible disappointment Your Lordship must have felt. But one must be brave at times like these. One must set an example for lesser men," Kedrigern said piously.

"What times? What disappointment?"

"To have your beloved Metalura

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back, and then to give her up so generously! So nobly!" Kedrigern wiped his eyes and said in a choked voice, "Forgive me, Your Lordship. One seldom sees such a display as I have seen."

"What did I do?" Morgosh asked cautiously.

"When I freed Metalura from her spell—"

"Freed her? She's still a statue!"

"Observe her attitude, Your Lordship. It's not the same as it was."

Climbing to his feet and approaching closer to the statue, Morgosh muttered, "No. No, it's not. Tell me, what's become of my precious child?"

"Once restored to common life, she began to weep copiously. She has found great peace and happiness in her enchanted state, and she begged to return to it for a time, until her enlightenment is complete. Your Lordship acceded to her entreaties, but the shock to your system was great. You ... you fell in a swoon," Kedrigern explained.

Morgosh studied the statue more closely. "She doesn't look as though she was imploring," he said dubiously.

"Well, I didn't mean to suggest that she groveled. A lady of her breeding, after all. ..."

Morgosh grunted. He lowered his gaze and noticed the morning star. "What's this doing here?" he demanded.

Kedrigern looked away. Awkwardly, he said, "Your Lordship was ... reluctant to comply. But it quickly passed."

"Reluctant? Did I...?"

"You very nearly did."

With a horrified cry, Morgosh took a step backward and flung an arm before his face. "My darling treasure — I might have chipped her! Smashed her to gravel!" he cried.

"Your Lordship might indeed — had I not prevented it."

Morgosh turned to Kedrigern, and the look in his eyes was that of a freezing man gazing at a fire. He stumbled to the wizard's side and threw his arms around him. "How can I thank you, Kedrigern? How can I ever reward you as you deserve?" he blubbered.

Kedrigern patted him gently and reassuringly on the shoulder. "Your Lordship will think of something," he said.

Kedrigern stayed at Mon Desespoir for two nights, and left on the gray morning of the third day. His accommodations were luxurious, and the food was superb, but Morgosh's interminable encomiums for his daughter eroded all patience. Not a crumb of bread, not a sip of wine could pass the lips without a tearful salute to dear, lapidified Metalura. Kedrigern found it insufferable, and was happy to put it all behind him.

He had lost his opportunity to wed a clever, well-born beauty, but there were compensations. Life with Metalura would have been a life of constant warfare, he was certain of

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that. And a woman of her standing would not be happy in his simple cottage, with only a troll to wait on her. There would be extensive remodeling, dust and confusion, constant interruptions in his work, troops of people everywhere, and Morgosh coming for long visits and bringing a small army of retainers, spoiling his daughter worse than ever. It might even become necessary to relocate entirely, and take a larger place in some fashionable neighborhood down below, on the plain. The very thought of such a move made Kedrigern's stomach churn.

He told himself that it had all been an idle dream, and he was lucky to have come out of it as well as he did. His marrying a nobleman's daughter was preposterous. But now the idea of marriage was in his head, and it was not easily dislodged.

Morgosh had rewarded him generously. There was no longer a need for him to consider the dowry when choosing a wife; he could marry anyone he liked. He could have a partner and companion, not a despot.

A strong, sensible woman with some experience of life as it really is: that was the kind of wife for a wizard. She need not be of noble blood. What, after all, was birth? Go back a few generations, and every noble name had its roots in brigandage. Nor need she be clever, or witty. She need not be a legendary beauty, either. Of course, she could not be some slack-jawed, dull-eyed cow who conversed in grunts. A comely lass with a clear mind and a sweet temper, that was the wife for Kedrigern. Though he was yet to meet the woman, and had no idea where to begin his search, he was confident that he was going to make her sublimely happy.

He camped in the forest for two nights, guarding his encampment with a simple spell against predators of all kinds, including human. On the third afternoon of travel, he came to an inn. It looked clean, and the aromas that came forth promised good dining. After two nights of sleeping on hard ground and eating dry bread and cheese, Kedrigern was ready for something more civilized. He stabled his donkey, a present from Morgosh, and entered the inn at a brisk, eager pace.

A girl was scrubbing the flagstones of the entry, and Kedrigern nearly fell over her. She looked up at him timidly, and he saw bright blue eyes and delightful freckles and a long tumble of thick hair the color of fresh-scraped carrots, and a charming snub nose and, as she rose and pulled her tattered skirts close around her, soft white arms and a neat, slender ankle.

"I'm terribly sorry to give you a start, miss," Kedrigern said with a slight bow. "It was clumsy of me."

"It were my fault, sir, all my fault. I be in the way, as I mustn't be," she said, with rustic intonations that lent great charm to her simple words. She curtsied repeatedly and looked up at

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him with wide, frightened eyes.

"Here now, what you be up to, Rasanta?" said a gruff voice from within. "You be warned about your carelessness, girl, and you pay no heed, and if I have to—" a large red-faced man with a shining bald head and a long brown beard came into view, scowling menacingly and shaking his fist. At the sight of Kedrigern he stopped short, turned his fist-shaking into a wave of welcome, and smiled brightly at the wizard.

"Welcome to Stiggman's Inn, traveler, where you will find the finest food and the cleanest beds this side of the mountains," he said jovially. To the girl, he snapped, "Be off, slut, and take your mop and your slop bucket with you," and then returning his attention to Kedrigern, he gestured to the main room, where a fire burned brightly. "Have a nice bit of warm, traveler, and I be bringing you a mug of my best ale to make up for this clumsy girl," he said, aiming a backhand swat at the red-haired Rasanta.

She ducked the blow, glared at him, gave one appealing glance to Kedrigern, and fled. He could not help but notice that she had a fine figure.

"More trouble than she be worth, that slut," Stiggman grumbled as he arranged a footstool before the fire for Kedrigern. "Wife have to pound her like bread dough to get a lick of work out of her. Surly trollop, too, she is."

"She seemed rather well-mannered, I thought."

"Oh, she know well enough how to please the men. They come flocking here to see the flirting and the flouncing and the jiggling of her. She be good at bringing the young men here to gawk and gape, though she be good for nothing else," Stiggman said. He quickly added, "It go no further than the gawking and the gaping, though, traveler. Stiggman's Inn be no house of bawdry, I tell you."

"Obviously not," Kedrigern said solemnly.

The ale was very good, and very cold, and very refreshing. The food was hot, and delicious, and in generous portion. As the evening wore on, young men began to fill the room, and as Stiggman had predicted, their eyes remained hungrily fixed on Rasanta as she hurried back and forth bearing mugs of ale. She was a most attractive girl, and even her ragged, dirty clothes could not detract from the beauty of her face and the perfection of her form. Kedrigern looked appreciatively, like every other man in the room, though his admiration was more detached than theirs. They were burly, noisy bumpkins whose small eyes glimmered with uncomplicated lust; Kedrigern was a man who knew beauty, and he savored the sight of Rasanta's fluid motion as he would the beauty of a fine sunset, or a difficult spell well wrought.

He could feel the glimmer rising in his own eyes when Rasanta stopped at his table to bring a fresh mug of ale,

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and he smelled the sweet fragrance of her hair and was warmed by the brightness of her smile. But of course anything more than detached admiration on his part was out of the question. She was hardly more than a child, and he was no young buck. Having passed his hundred and sixtieth birthday, he accepted the fact that he was approaching his middle years. A lighthearted roll in the hay was out of the question, and a more serious relationship was impossible. Respected senior wizards simply do not marry slaveys. Not even young, beautiful slaveys with figures that grow more incredibly perfect as one observes them. No. He shook his head, drained his tankard, and slipped up the stairs to his chamber.

It was a small chamber, and he was fortunate to have to share it with no one. Unfortunately, it was directly over the great room, and the customers had by this time grown very noisy. For silence, and for the security of his two bags of gold received from Morgosh, he placed a small enclosing spell upon the chamber, to endure until he woke. Tugging off his boots and pulling his tunic over his head, he fell on the bed and went at once into a sound sleep.

Next morning, as Kedrigern breakfasted on bread and butter and cold cider, Stiggman slipped up to him and in a confidential voice inquired, "And did you be having a good night, sir?"

"Yes, I did. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, and I didn't wake until after daybreak."

Leering, Stiggman said, "Ah, I understand, sir, I understand." Winking and nodding and leering, he sidled out of the room.

That was odd behavior for an innkeeper, but Kedrigern paid it no heed. Nor did he trouble himself over the pouting glance Rasanta gave him from the doorway, nor the imperious toss of her head as she turned her back on him. He finished his breakfast, paid his bill, and made ready to leave.

It was a fine, crisp morning for traveling. Kedrigern started down the forest road at an easy pace, and just as he passed from sight of the inn, Rasanta dashed from the roadside and clutched at his boot, sobbing piteously. He halted the donkey and dismounted.

"What's wrong, Rasanta?" he asked.

"Oh, sir, take me away. Take me with you, please!" she implored, throwing herself at his feet, clinging desperately to his boots. "They treats me awful here. Take me back to my father, and he be rewarding you generous."

"Just relax, Rasanta," said Kedrigern, lifting her to her feet. "I'll help you if I can. Now, tell me what's wrong."

"I wants to go back to my father, sir, and they be never letting me go. They keeps me here for to bring all the young men to the inn. I hates it, sir, but they forces me to smile, and lure the poor lads to drink."

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"You seemed to be enjoying yourself last night."

"Oh, they beats me fierce if I don't look happy, sir. Look at this," she said, hiking up her skirt to reveal a set of purple fingermarks high on her thigh.

"And this here," she added, tugging her blouse down to show a similar mark on her breast.

"Oh dear me. ... Well. ... Who is your father, Rasanta? Where can I find him?"

"He be a wealthy merchant, sir, in the islands over the western sea. I was stole from him by pirates when I was a baby, and he be seeking me ever since. A traveler told me, sir. My father says he be giving my weight in gold to the man who brings me home. And his blessing on our marriage," she said, shyly lowering her eyes, "if the man do want me."

This new configuration of circumstances was very dramatic, and Kedrigern took a moment to allow it to sink in. A wealthy merchant's daughter in distress. Her weight in gold. A woman lovelier than Metalura, and far sweeter tempered. A chance to do a fine, noble deed, and reap a charming reward. He took Rasanta by her slender waist and swung her into the saddle.

"Up you go, my dear. I'm taking you home," he said.

"Oh, thank you, sir. I know the way. We have to take a little side trail not far from here."

"Lead on, then," Kedrigern said cheerfully. He felt a hundred and twenty again.

They proceeded down the road for a short time, then Rasanta swung the donkey onto a narrow trail leading off to the right. At first Kedrigern walked by her side, but as the forest closed in, he was forced to take the lead. he glanced back from time to time, and each glance was rewarded with an adoring smile.

The trail ended in a circular clearing. Kedrigern puzzled, turned just in time to see Rasanta spring lightly from the donkey's back. She stuck two fingers in her mouth and gave a shrill whistle. A large man stepped from the woods. Another appeared at the far side of the clearing. Then two more came into sight. Their expressions were serious, and they carried clubs.

"He do have a good full purse, and a bag of coins in each boot," Rasanta said.

"Rasanta, you disappoint me," said Kedrigern sadly.

She smiled, shrugged her pretty shoulders, and stepped back to allow her four ruffians room for their work. As they hefted their clubs, Kedrigern raised a hand and said, "Before you do anything, I must warn you that I am a wizard. If you attack, I will defend myself in ways you're sure to find unpleasant."

One of the ruffians laughed scornfully. "You be no wizard. I did see a wizard once. I knows a wizard."

Kedrigern sighed and nodded wear-

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ily. "I suppose your wizard had a long white beard, and wore a pointy hat."

"Aye, he did."

"The poverty of your experience leads you to false generalizations. Despite my plain attire, I am a wizard. My anger will be deleterious to your well-being."

"He be no wizard, you ninnyes!" Rasanta cried.

"I have a feeling that all you lads have been as badly used as I have at one time or another. I have no wish to harm you. Just go away, and take the lady with you, and no one need suffer."

The four burly ruffians hesitated at his calm words. They looked uncertainly at one another, each of them clearly wanting to get out of this but unwilling to be the first to suggest it. Then Rasanta's furious voice cut the tense silence.

"Fine lot of babies you be! Four of you, with clubs, and you be shaking in your boots for fear of one skinny little geezer!" she cried.

That set things moving. The four lurched forward, raising their clubs. Kedrigern, his eyes blazing, swept his hands wide and spat out a short, hissing phrase. In an instant, he was surrounded by five astonished cats. Four of them were big striped toms. The fifth was a fluffy, carrot-colored female.

"Work it out among yourselves," he said coldly, and mounted the patient donkey.

He had not gone far down the trail when a great yowling and screeching broke out behind him. He smiled a grim smile and rode on. The spell would be of brief duration, but he was confident that the memory of the experience would linger. Travelers would be safe in these parts for a long time to come.

Kedrigern took the low road home, through the heart of the Dismal Bog. It was a gloomy place at this time of year, and he knew that it would suit his mood. A mature, respected wizard — not a geezer, by any means but certainly a man who ought to know better — should not go panting after scullions, however buxom and bright-eyed they be. Nor should he dream of wedding the pampered daughter of a foolish nobleman simply because her dowry is generous. As well dream of marrying a princess, he told himself.

Greed and lechery; that's the way of the world, he thought, and it nearly did me in. I was right to turn my back on it all. I belong on Silent Thunder Mountain. Just me and faithful Spot.

Kedrigern had given up on the world some years ago, except for the occasional emergency call to help a friend or shore up his finances. The world, to him, was a noisy, busy, overcrowded place full of people he did not wish to meet — brutes, thieves, liars, viragoes; alchemists trying to turn everything into gold, and bar-

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barians trying to turn everything into ashes. The clerics, who should have been setting things right, were too busy beseeching God to throw down their enemies; they had no time to spare for good works. And the rare souls who worked hard and lived decent lives generally died early and unpleasant deaths, victims of the brutes. No, the world was no place for a conscientious wizard.

He felt all this. But he was lonely still, and the company of a knee-high troll with a one-syllable vocabulary was not a cheering prospect. With a deep, heartfelt sigh, he reined in the donkey and dismounted. He wanted to sit on a rock and gaze into the gloom and feel sorry for himself.

It was the quiet time of early afternoon, and his sighs were much too loud against the profound stillness of the bog. The infrequent *bideep* of a restless peeper, or the *brereep* of a toad, or the angry *grugump* of a bullfrog only heightened the quietude. He soon fell silent, and then there was only the soft brush of the wind and now and then a distant splash as life and sudden death went on in the far reaches of the bog.

He became aware of the faint, small sound of a woman crying. She was weeping bitterly, with deep heartrending sobs that brought the moisture to Kedrigern's own eyes. The sound was faraway, as if diminished by distance, yet it seemed to come from nearby — as if a tiny woman were weeping her heart out almost within reach of his hand. And there was not a living creature near but himself, the donkey, and a scattering of toads seated on lily pads, a few so close he could reach out and touch them.

"Oh, woe! Woe and alas, to be a toad," said the small, sad voice.

This was enchantment, no doubt about it. Some unfortunate woman had gone and gotten herself turned into a toad, and now she was wailing away, hoping to arouse the pity of some passerby. Pity, indeed, thought Kedrigern indignantly. She needn't look to me to solve her problem. Did she think he was going to go sloshing about in those chilly black waters, kissing every toad in sight? Croak away, madam, he muttered under his breath. You probably deserve your fate. If I turn you back into a woman you'll only insult witches and wizards, or lure travelers off to some isolated spot to have their heads bashed in and their purses lifted. Twice fooled is enough, thank you.

The sound of weeping came again, very near. Kedrigern noticed, for the first time, a tiny green toad on a lily pad, so close he could make out every detail. For a toad, it was rather an attractive little creature. It had a certain dignity one does not expect of a toad. On its head, between the two big bulging eyes, was a tiny circlet of gold. Clearly, this was no ordinary toad.

Kedrigern cleared his throat and said, "Forgive my forwardness, toad, but are you weeping?"

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"Yes, I am," came a tiny voice in reply. "And who would not weep at such a fate as mine? Oh, misery!"

"Come, now. Is it really so bad being a toad?"

"It is when one was once the most beautiful princess in all the land," came the indignant reply.

"Oh dear. Yes, in that case, I imagine it is. I'm terribly sorry, toad."

"Princess," the voice corrected him.

"Yes, of course, Princess. My apologies."

"No need to apologize, good sir. Your sympathy does you credit. Alas, I need more than the sympathy of kind souls. I am the victim of wicked enchantment!"

"I may be able to help you, Princess. I don't suppose a kiss from me would do much to help, but I know a handsome prince, and he owes me a favor. I'm sure he'd be willing—"

"It wouldn't help. It's kind of you to offer, but a prince would be useless in my case. I require a wizard. A very special wizard."

"Indeed?"

"In all the world, only one wizard can help me — the great master of counterspells, Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain. But alas, he remains aloof in his retreat, and never sets foot in the world below."

"Never? Are you so positive?"

"So I am told. Oh, sir, I've thought so long and deeply on Kedrigern that I feel as if I know him; and knowing him, I love him."

"Do you know anything about this Kedrigern?"

"Only what is in my heart," the wee voice said sweetly. "I know he must be handsome, and wise, and kind, and good."

"He is," Kedrigern solemnly assured her.

"And if he heard my tragic tale, he would assist me."

"He will."

"Oh, sir, do not mock me."

"I speak the truth, princess. Tell me — who placed this enchantment on you?"

"It was the work of Bertha, the Bog-Fairy."

Kedrigern gave a thoughtful groan, and was silent for a moment. Bog-fairies were a mean, tricky lot, and Bertha, the resident fairy of the Dismal Bog, was one of the meanest and trickiest. Any spell of hers would carry a full freight of hidden traps for the unwary. Unless, of course, it was done impromptu.

"One thing more, Princess. Was this enchantment the result of an outburst of pique on Bertha's part, or was it premeditated?"

"It was very premeditated, sir. The invitations to my christening were garbled somehow, and Bertha was overlooked. She took offense, and placed the spell. On my eighteenth birthday ... just as I blew out the..." The little voice broke in a sob.

This complicated matters. Bertha, with time to plot and plan, had proba-

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bly interlarded her basic enchantment with all sorts of backup spells that would be triggered by any attempt at a counterspell. This unfortunate little toad might find herself transformed into a beautiful princess with an insatiable appetite for flies, or an uncontrollable desire to hunker down on a lily pad for the night. Kedrigern had confidence in his powers. But he had been in his profession long enough to know the dangers of overconfidence. Magic was a slippery business; even a few centuries' experience was no guarantee against unpleasant surprises. In the midst of his ruminations came the tiny voice of Princess.

"Please, kind sir, help me if you can. Bring Kedrigern to me, or me to Kedrigern. Set me free of this vile enchantment," she said piteously.

That resolved the issue for him. Rising, he said sternly, "It will be dangerous, Princess. Are you willing to take the risk?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then hop up here, onto dry ground," said Kedrigern, pointing to a little knoll that rose between the road and the bog's edge. The little toad did as instructed, and he said, "Good. Now, stay very still. This shouldn't hurt a bit."

"What are you going to do, sir?" she said, and in her tiny voice was a note of apprehension.

"A counterspell. You're about to become a princess, Princess. Now, not another word."

Kedrigern drew a pouch from inside his shirt. He shook out five small black stones, each a perfect hemisphere about the size of his little fingernail, and set them in a pentacle around the motionless toad. From another pouch, he trickled a thin stream of sparkling silvery powder in a runic figure. He walked three times around the knoll, mumbling under his breath, then reversed himself and walked nine times around in the opposite direction.

This done, he took a pin from his tunic and pricked his finger — it was the part of the spell he disliked — and squeezed a single drop of blood into each of the interstices between the black stones. Now all was ready.

He stepped back, raised his hands, and began to speak in a soft, liquid language that rose and fell melodiously. He brought his hands together suddenly; a great thunderclap rolled over the silent bog, and a flicker of darkness, like the swirl of a cloak, passed over them.

On the knoll stood a woman in a dress of pale yellow and green, with a cloak of deeper green over her shoulders. Her blue eyes were wide with astonishment. Glistening jet black hair tumbled in waves to her hips, restrained only by a golden circlet on her brows. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, or hoped to see, or imagined, and all his heart went out to her at first sight.

He stepped forward, took her hand, and raised it to his lips. "Forgive

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me my deception, Princess. I am Kedrigern, and when you spoke my name, I knew that some kind fate had brought me here. I was meant to free you from your enchantment. And now that you see me, tell me, are you disappointed? Am I all you hoped I'd be? Speak to me, Princess!"

She looked up at him with eyes the color of cornflowers. Her perfect features softened in a tender smile, and she reached up to touch his cheek.

"Brereep," she said.

"I just heard the tone and the time was 1:00 P.M., but it seemed out of joint. Check that out, Smarkins."

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A story about assassination — but in a good cause — from a writer who has considered the theme before. Mr. Malzberg's book about sf, THE ENGINES OF THE NIGHT, was recently nominated for a Hugo.

Reparations

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

Brown tells me that he is sick of it: sick of it, sick of it, do you understand? "Vengeance is mine, saith the *Lord*," he points out. "Here is a distinct admonition mistaken as a threat. The task of revenge, *He* is saying, is *His*, not ours. You cannot repair the sin by slaying the sinner." Nonetheless the famous Gerald P__ sighs. He does his work sadly but well. Here a dead racketeer, over there, beneath the riverbed, a drowned chieftain; in the Secaucus flatland the dismembered torso of he who had been chief procurer of the east — it is said. Do not ask what lies in Manwah, near the state line. At a rally in Pennsylvania just the other day, friends, M- had the top of his head rise from his skull like the lid of a hot pot; his brains subsequently appeared; in due course he toppled over. Gerald P__'s signature to be sure. The assailant has not been found. Warnings have been issued. Massive funeral services were held for M- in which the assassin was mentioned in hushed and respectful tones. Although Brown will not admit to this or anything else — he is sly on the specifics as befits a man of circumstance — he must take a certain pride in his work.

Gerald P__, Gerald P__, an honorable working name. "You *should* be proud," I say to him. I am, after all, not only his confidant but his oldest and closest friend. "If you did not assume the dreadful burden of these reparations, who would? Truly it can be said that you order and adjust the world; without your acts of fiery balance it would be overcome by evil. Take pleasure in your work; all of us find parts of our duty distasteful but in the end your job offers more satisfactions than are found by many of us. You should be happy: such beautiful

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work on M-. One hundred thousand at an outdoor rally and you did it so cleanly, faded away so abruptly that if he hadn't died on the spot no one would have even noticed."

Gerald shakes his head, blushes, looks away. Small dimples of embarrassment appear in his cheeks. It may be true that he despises his work but on the other hand, without praise where would he be? How can he *not* take pride in what they call a job well done? He has struggled too richly to walk away from this easily.

Disguised as Gerald P__ once more, Brown considers his next move. He receives assignments in code in a post office box on the far side of town; as far as he knows he has never had contact with the ultimate employer. Cash arrives once a month rain or shine. As P__, in full assassin's gear, Brown sits in the passenger seat of his old Skylark parked outside a warehouse waiting for the target to emerge. Rain comes down heavily obscuring his view; the subject is already two hours overdue. Gerald should stow his gear and wait for another day but seizures of reluctance have already cost him two good possibilities: today is the terminal date of his assignment. He knows that there will be angry chatter in that post office box if he does not take care of this. Cowardice, no less than a sense of honor will, however, drive him. His employer is obviously an angry man; he does not want to plumb the depths of unspoken rage. Never has Brown — or at least has Gerald — failed to carry through an assignment even though there have been recent close calls. Years of sad and dedicated work could go up in smoke if he does not take care of this baby smuggler and he does not want to fail on assignment. A dignified resignation is one thing, all right, but to quit in the field would definitely be another. Gerald P__ shrugs and strokes the carbine. Unnoticed by all, I whisper encouragement; the words penetrating his heart, penetrate mine.

The baby smuggler is no fool. Working on the fringes of legality for years makes paranoia as much a part of the working equipment as unmarked bills. Furthermore, certain informants, who cannot be named, so confidential are they, have alerted him to the fact. Gerald P__ is on the stalk. The baby smuggler has heard of him. Many people have heard of Gerald; an assassin of such efficacy acquires, whether necessarily or not, a subterranean reputation. On a night of such inclemency, with light and shadows prowling ominously in the glitter, our victim would be a fool to go to his car. He has decided to stay until dawn in his offices, drinking black coffee from a thermos and making big plans for the future. As a treat he will browse through photo albums containing pictures of women he has wronged, men he has cheated, children whose lives he has destroyed.

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The baby smuggler is one of those who obtains physical pleasure and release from the contemplation and performance of evil. He is not to be condemned for that: Brown once achieved similar pleasure and release from the practice of good until he came to understand that flesh was all; motive, circumstance and that all dialectic was rationalization. This insight, Brown later concluded, destroyed his life. Similar affliction has not beset the baby smuggler who is not so highly internalized. He sits eating a sandwich and glancing through the photo album balanced on his knee. Even though P__ may be outside he is at relative peace. This is more than can be said for Brown even though he performs good and the baby smuggler evil.

Peace for the peaceful is always there.

Brown got into the business of reparations on a fluke. Originally he had been a philosophy major only half a thesis short of his doctorate when he had quit suddenly to become a trumpeter in a local band. A series of strange and unintimated coincidences had led him to Hollywood and New York, a profitable career as a studio musician until, in his mid thirties, intonation fled and he was left with awesome techniques that could produce music of only the foulest kind. Despairing, Brown sought counselling, psychiatry, the love of many others but, although he had interesting experiences, none of them returned his ear and soon enough the money ran out. At about this time the Network was seeking a replacement in the northeastern sector for Michael B● whose trigger finger had become spavined with age, and because Brown seemed to be the kind of man who might make a worthy successor — high intelligence, broken spirit, generalized rage, angst and the like — he had been scouted carefully for months before the approach was made in a cafeteria. At the time Brown had been reduced to life in a furnished room and evenings out alone in cafeterias, his latest (and penultimate) mistress having thrown him to the winds. Brown was amenable to recruitment which was carried through with all of the Network's characteristic finesse. Soon enough he was given his post office box and a statement of principles. He had been in the business for almost four years before he felt the first faint whisper of scruple.

That scruple had joined him when Brown had been obliged to kill a concrete manufacturer who loved his family warmly and well but who had adulterated his products deliberately and had caused a pedestrian bridge to collapse, bearing several innocents to their death. This, however, is not part of our narrative and cannot be further discussed. The origin of scruple,

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Brown has come to understand, is as irrelevant as is philosophy to motive: *when it is time it is time* is his aphorism and for Brown *and* Gerald P__ it has been time for a while now. It is merely an issue of whether he can be propped up through a few last assignments until a suitable replacement is found. (The Network is still scouting; needless to say possibilities are screened *very* carefully. A mistake would be fatal.) In this dull and dangerous period it has become my duty as his oldest and closest friend to jolly him through the depressions, keep his carbine up, keep him on the stalk and, although I am well paid for this, I like to think that I would work for free, not only because I love Brown but because I have come to love Gerald, the assumed identity, the spector of revenge of my dreams and western civilization, who has done — let us face this squarely — a brutal and splendid job of righting wrongs. "Come now," I say to him therefore in the Skylark, "be of good cheer. This rain will not last forever. Soon enough he will come ricky-racketing down those splendidly dangerous stairs and a single shot will do the trick. If you miss the shock would topple him."

"I don't know," Brown says. He *is* Brown at this moment; more and more he lapses into the shabby persona of a tone-deaf trumpeter. They will have to replace him; I can no longer deny his collapse. "What right do I have to make that judgment? Who am I to say that this deserves death, that that is permitted to live? Vengeance is *mine*, saith—"

"Ah, yes," I say hurriedly. I do not want to go through *that* once more. "But you were never religious and besides these decisions have been made for you. They are out of your hands, having been given by excellent superiors who are surely in a position to know this as they know everything, Gerald."

"My name is Brown, not Gerald," he says, looking indifferently at the carbine. "I wish that you at least would call me by my name. I can't deal with this double-life nonsense anymore. It's childish."

I sigh. And sigh again. "Whatever you say, Brown. At least admit that this new religiosity is mere cover, cheap posturing. The truth is that you've lost your nerve."

If I expect this to hit him to the bone I am quite disappointed. "Of *course* I've lost my nerve," Gerald says, looking at me disarmingly. "Any feeling man would. Just how much self-confrontation do you think *any* of us can take? I've learned to love to kill."

Events muddle, accelerate. It is perhaps best to handle this difficult material through transition, whisk, whisk. Sequentiality is too painful. Also predictable. After a suitable lapse of time the baby smuggler does indeed emerge from his offices. Perhaps it is on the next evening, perhaps it is sev-

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eral weeks later (when his informants have wrongly advised the dogs have been called off). He sways on stairs, adjust lapels, breathes deeply and begins his descent. The first shot goes wide of the left temple by many feet and the baby smuggler sways in astonishment, saves himself from toppling by gripping a pole and then begins to shriek. The next shot is even more embarrassing, slashing into brick a yard from his head. He shrieks, gathers himself into an urgent fetal ball, propels himself in the direction from which he has come and the third shot can be seen only as obeisance to form — it is below the fleeing target by a man's height. The baby smuggler forces the door open, staggers inside. In the dreadful quiet I say to Gerald, "That was quite unnecessary. Quite shocking really to be so deliberately inept. Whatever your feelings, you do have a job. You have responsibilities."

"I tried," says Gerald P__." Sullenly, I would say. "He was agile. These things happen."

"They are not supposed to happen."

"You are dooming me by my competence, by my unusual luck."

"You had no luck trying to stay in E-flat," I remind him. I am chilled and disgusted. I will have to report failure and the baby smuggler deserved death as much as any victim. A case can be made for the concrete manufacturer, even the politician is known to have had a generous thought, a loving mistress, but for the baby smuggler a clean death was the only epitaph. "You will pay for this," I say. "I am simply warning you as your oldest and closest friend: *I* wouldn't exact the penalty but someone will. I am sorry for you, Gerald."

"My name is Brown," Gerald P__ says determinedly and breaks down the carbine, turns it to litter on the floor of the Skylark. I look at him with disgust. A fallen saint is no saint at all: a fallen saint is a clown.

Brown (no longer Gerald P__; the epaulet of his pseudonym has been stripped from him with the key to his post office box) is brought before the delegate committee for a hearing. It is my duty, per custom, to defend him but I have little enough to say. "Thirteen successful assignments," I say, "Should mitigate one abysmal failure." It is the best I can do. "Consider who freed us from B-. Consider the hero who exploded W- from the planet. Have some compassion for the mighty rifle that sprang loose X- who as we only know should have died in his cradle or at his mother's bosom. Remember the great shot that tore off M-'s skull in the stadium, that was no small accomplishment and what a shot!" No use, of course. These cases all have precedent; the hearings are *pro forma*. "Perhaps you would like to say a few words," I advise Brown. "I can do nothing more."

He shakes his head, picks up his

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trumpet and plays the opening notes of the bass-baritone aria of the last part of Handel's *Messiah.* The trumpet shall sound and so forth. Somehow in this difficult time he has recovered his ear. The notes are purifying, exalting, even the committee sheds a tear. "Consider that," I say, hard put to make a point. "Shall I essay a shaky metaphor and say that our Angel Gabriel has returned to his instrument of choice?" The committee squints. "I didn't think so," I agree. Brown laughs, plays a high D. The eaves shake.

"I can do nothing more," I say. "Defense is a hard business."

The committee nods sympathetically and pronounces sentence. It is the usual, of course. "I must say in closing," it offers, "that thirteen successes only make failure more dreadful. The first crime may be the most heinous. It usually is."

"It is not my first crime," Brown says mildly. "It would have been my fourteenth." He fingers a valve and begins the *Gloria* from the Bach B Minor Mass. The committee and I listen with pleasure. If nothing else, Brown's recovered gifts must give humility. Anything, then, should be possible. "A single person cannot clean up the world," Brown says, behind the trumpet. "No one can clean up the world. One can only enact one's desires." He stands, looking quite impressive for all his new seediness: Brown is trying a martyr's persona. "If you are *quite* ready," he says.

Dolefully, committee and I watch as he is led away. He had all the makings and was great in his time. But the makings and the moment are never enough. Life teaches us plenty.

The baby smuggler, having been approached and primed is ready for his first assignment. He has accepted it with eagerness; even as he wipes damp palms on denim waiting for the party to appear he knows he will not fail. The carbine is comforting. When they come into view he will lead the shot and so on. Having taken the honored name of P__ to continue his work, he feels he has paid sufficient homage to form and there is nothing else he need do. He owes them nothing.

In due course, if the new Gerald shows signs of wilting I must, as his oldest and closest friend, perform once again the ritual of encouragement and succor but now, as is usual at the outset, I am given time to rest and I look forward to a brief vacation. Reparations are a hard business. They take their toll. They sure do take their toll.

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In which a journalist takes on a seemingly impossible task, the search for an invisible woman...

Rouge On An Empty Glass

BY
GARY JENNINGS

Prudence reclined on her narrow bed, stretching like a cat, and luxuriated in her wickedness. It was sinful doings for a girl going on sixteen, but she liked to lie naked for a while before she put on her heavy flannel nightdress.

Granny would be shocked if she knew. She would make Prudence stand up in Meeting, and confess to having a shameful habit. It wasn't fitting for a girl near marrying age ever to expose herself completely, even to herself.

This night the air was warm with spring and fragrant from the blossoms of the orchard. The curtains of her window billowed and let in puffs of breeze that caressed her whole skin. Sinful it might have been, but pleasurable it surely was.

And then she became aware that something other than springtime air was fondling her. The touch was hardly less light than that of the breeze, but she could feel it wandering up and down her body like gentle fingertips.

She stiffened, startled, but the rippling caress soon soothed her again. She rolled sensuously on the bed, and the invisible touch danced faster, more insistently along her body. She closed her eyes and sighed. Something seemed to brush her lips; this was further than her imagination had ever taken her before. She kissed back, while the insinuating touch lingered along her breast, her waist, her thighs. Whatever was on her lips pressed more heavily and hungrily.

Prudence opened her eyes in sudden fright, almost expecting to see someone beside her on the bed. Then the invisible caress became an embrace. Her body was no longer hers to command, and she cried out.

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That was a long time ago.

"And now tell me, Auntie Ritter," Kearny asked mechanically. "To what do you give credit for having attained your great age?"

This was an odious assignment. "It's a job for a cub!" he had protested to the features editor. "So the old biddy's a hundred and ten, what of it? Down there in Hex County everybody lives forever. She's probably the youngest in her sewing circle!" But the editor was adamant. Kearny had grumbled every mile out here, and now was plodding through the clichés of a stereotyped interview.

"Yessir," the old woman maundered on. "Midwifed for this countryside right up until I was eighty years of age."

"That so?" murmured Kearny, sipping the lemonade Auntie Ritter's great-grandniece had handed him. "You must have helped quite a few new citizens into the world."

"Sure and a plenty."

"Any of them become famous, Auntie? Or are there any you remember particularly?"

"None famous," she said, and then cackled. "Some in jail, some in politics, a good many in their graves long afore me." Her cackle became a whoop. "One of 'em, now, nobody's ever seen atall."

"How's that?" asked Kearny boredly.

"Prudence Summerfield's child," said the old woman. "Prudence was a farm girl from out toward Haven, who'd got in the family way — without a husbin. Her grandfolks disowned her and sent her to a cousin here to have her wood's-colt in secret shame. It come early, unexpected, in the middle of a winter storm, and they called for me. Dr. Prinz didn't come till it was all over — and then what could I tell him?"

"What did you tell him?" sighed Kearny.

"Why, that the child was not to be seen."

"False pregnancy?" Kearny ventured.

"That's what Dr. Prinz said. Much he knew. I'd delivered the child, held it in my arms — but there wasn't a shadder of a baby there for mortal eyes to lay sight on."

"Wait, I'm confused," Kearny interrupted. "Was there a baby or wasn't there?"

"There was, sir. I could touch it, feel it all over — a little girl, it was — but couldn't see it no more than air. I pinched it, even, to make it squall and come to the doctor's notice. But it held still (always was a quiet child), and anyway he was took up with the mother right then. Prudence had swounded and never woke up. She died that morning."

"Well ... the baby. What—?"

"It was a peculiar happenstance, no mistake. But that was a peculiar year — oddities and queerities all over. Like

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the lights in the night skies that some said was shooting stars and others called Northern Lights. Anyways, I was old enough even then to take things as they come."

"But the baby...?"

"Wellsir, the cousin whose house it was, being a godly woman, she deemed the Old Scratch was in the whole thing. She said good riddance to bad rubbish, and took not a whit of notice of the baby I tried to tell her about. They buried poor Prudence Summerfield in an unmarked grave, and that was the end of it."

"But the baby...?" Kearny persisted. This was the most bizarre case of senile dementia he had ever run across.

"I took her along with me. Nobody else wanted her."

"An ... invisible baby," said Kearny. "Have you, er, still got it?" He angled a glance at the great-grandniece sitting nearby, in her all-too-solid flesh.

"Lawks, no. I don't know where she went."

"Where ... she ... went...?"

"I raised the youngun as well as I could. It was the Christian thing to do. But when she begun to walk it was hard to keep track of her; you can imagine. Wasn't long before I'd only hear her come around when she got hungry. And not long after that, she went away for good. Poor tyke. Thirty years ago that must've been. If she'd lived, she'd be about your age by now. But I opine she was most likely run over by an automobile or something."

This, Kearny reflected, was a piece of his birthday story that would never get past the copy desk's blue pencil, but he couldn't help pursuing it.

"Did anyone else ever see — I mean know about — this child?"

"Oh, yes. She had her little playmates: the Cheever children and others. But she was always shy of grownups. And they seldom gave heed to me talking about her." The old woman's wrinkles crinkled. "No more'n you will," she said slyly.

But she was wrong. Something compelled Kearny to pass up the train he had intended to take back to the city. Somehow he simply couldn't go back without following up this preposterous tale. Sure, this was the silly season, but the old Ritter woman had seemed so sincere. Before he left the community he talked to a couple of the surviving Cheever "children" and to old Dr. Prinz, a man almost as ancient as Auntie.

"...Every indication of a slightly premature but otherwise normal parturition, except for the absence of a fetus or placenta ... remarkable case of hysteric pseudocyesis...."

"But was it?" Kearny asked himself, when he was finally on the train. "Just suppose ... an invisible woman...." The conductor stopped stock-still and stared.

So did the features editor of the *Herald*. "Kearny, you're crazy."

"Maybe I am. But I've checked the

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paper's morgue for thirty years back and dammit, there *are* some funny stories in the files. So-called poltergeists that started acting up in that neighborhood back about that time. Unsolved thefts, unexplained phenomena, locked-room mysteries...."

"And the existence of an invisible broad would account for them?"

"When you have discarded all the impossibilities," Kearny quoted, "then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

The editor said a hairy word, but dismissed Kearny good-naturedly. "As long as it doesn't interfere with anything else, go right ahead with your ghost hunting. Me, invisible women I don't believe till I see 'em. Haw!"

Kearny suffered a lot of kidding from his colleagues during the next week or two, but it didn't divert him. The truth was that he had become obsessed with his invisible lady, and she took the place of more tangible but less tantalizing females in his daydreams. What might she be like? Would she like him; would he like her? What would she look like? No. *Look* like!?

But the first stranger he turned up was anything but an evanescent lady. It was a very solid redheaded man who loomed bulkily in the doorway of his city room cubicle.

"Mr. Kearny?"

Kearny admitted it. The big man hesitated, staring at him with an air of speculation. "Can I help you?" Kearny prompted, and at that the big man stepped inside the cubicle.

"My name's Farabee," he said. "I'm head of the security force at Stratton's department store."

Kearny suddenly turned pink. "I guess I should have been expecting you," he said sheepishly. "Sit down."

"Then you know why I'm here." The man took a chair and leaned over to toss a small sheet of paper onto the desk. "It's about these notes."

Kearny's blush deepened. "I suppose I really should have asked for permission."

The redheaded man gave him a flat stare and then retrieved the piece of paper to read aloud: "To the Invisible Lady — I know of your predicament. I have talked with Auntie Ritter. I may be able to help. Call John Kearny at the *Herald.*" He put the paper down again and said, "I'd be inclined to call that the writing of a sick man."

Kearny managed an embarrassed little laugh. "I never thought how it would look to the store detectives."

"Not that there's anything incriminating about it," said Farabee. "Or lewd or anything. But the clerks have been finding copies of this note all over. In dressing rooms, on floor dummies, in the toiletries department, ladies' lingerie, in—"

"Yes, yes," mumbled Kearny, quite maroon by now. "Well, I suppose I shouldn't have tried it on my own. But I thought I might be able to catch your mystery shoplifter for you."

Farabee's eyebrows went up. "I

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must say you've hit on a novel way of doing it. Mr. Kearny, several customers have found these notes, too. They ask questions. They wonder, Pretty soon they get to thinking there's something *strange* about Stratton's."

"I didn't mean to cost you any business," Kearny apologized. "But this shoplifter has been looting your main downtown business store for two years — everything from panty girdles to mink coats. How much has she cost you?"

Farabee scowled. "We don't know it's been just one person all this time. And we don't know for certain it's a she. How do you?"

"For God's sake — panty girdles?" said Kearny. "Now don't go accusing me of being in cahoots. But working on a newspaper you come across all kinds of screwball mysteries. Sometimes you can put a couple of them together and...."

"Screwball is a word I wasn't going to use," Farabee said sourly. "However...."

"Here." Kearny handed a copy of the latest *Herald* across the desk. "Look in the personals. You'll find the same message."

"I didn't come here to criticize the newspaper business," said Farabee. "Just to ask you please to stay out of ours."

Kearny reminded himself that Stratton's was a big advertiser, and not to be alienated.

"Don't take it amiss," Farabee went on, as he stood up to leave. "Maybe it's a code of some kind, but that invisible-lady stuff could get you a nice quiet room down at City General. Now I'd like to thank you for your interest in our troubles at the store. But you'd be doing me *and* the store a favor if you'd knock off the hide-and-go-seek."

With that and an offhand salute, he left Kearny simmering — but not for long. The detective had been gone for less than an hour when Kearny's telephone rang.

"Big lout probably lodged a complaint upstairs," he muttered, picking it up gingerly. "Kearny."

"This is the invisible lady," said a soft voice in his ear.

Another damfool smart aleck, Kearny thought angrily, and snarled, "This is Mandrake the Magician. How are things in never-never land?"

There was a brief, shocked silence. Then the soft voice said, almost wistfully, "I was sure that note must be a joke. I'm — sorry I fell for it. Good—"

"*Wait!*" Kearny, galvanized, stopped her in the middle of the word. "Are you really—? Look, Miss Summerfield, don't hang up. It wasn't a joke."

"No. It wasn't." The voice was wary now. "You know that name. Summerfield."

"I didn't mean to sound flippant. It's just that I've taken a lot of ribbing about that message, and I thought you—"

"It's anything but funny to me,"

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said the soft voice. "Just what did you want?"

"To talk to you, that's all. I thought maybe, if somebody knew your whole story...."

"He could write it up for the front page."

"No. This has nothing to do with the newspaper."

"It's just a coincidence that you're a reporter."

"I won't lie to you. If I hadn't stumbled on something in the course of my work, I'd never have known about you. But I'll never write a word of the story, if you want it that way."

"Your note mentioned..." She sounded amused, "...*helping* me?"

"The way I understand it, you've led a pretty lonely life. I just — I guess I just thought you could use a friend."

There was another silence in the telephone, as if she were weighing this. Then she said guardedly, "Well, there's really nothing I can lose by it. And I'll admit I'm curious about how you ... I'll talk to you, Mr. Kearny, if we can meet on my terms."

"You name it," said Kearny, half-envisioning a shuttered room in a haunted house at midnight.

"It's — let's see — about cocktail time," she murmured, and then surprised Kearny considerably when she suggested, "How about the Keystone Room at the Hotel Allegheny?"

"Why, er, sure," stammered Kearny, wondering wildly how to ask how he would recognize her.

"I'm wearing a dark blue linen suit. I'll be in one of the banquettes nearest the lobby, and I'll be drinking a vodka martini. The only condition is that you set no traps — they'd be futile, I assure you — and that you come alone."

"My word on that," said Kearny. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

She hung up without ceremony, and Kearny sat looking stupidly at the receiver in his hand. Somehow he had flushed out a woman who practically admitted being the Stratton store thief, who answered to the name Summerfield, who identified herself as the invisible lady — and who sounded anything but.

Was somebody making a fool of him? Everybody from the boss to the typesetters had snickered at his ad in the personals. An elaborate practical joke might be in the making. For a moment he determined not to keep the cocktail date. Let the boys sit there at the Keystone bar while their joke fell flat. But then an uneasy idea struck him, and he telephoned the Stratton store. He was in luck; Farabee was back in his office.

"Just answer one question," Kearny said. "Is there a lady's suit — dark blue linen — on your list of pilfered items?"

"Let me check," Farabee said surlily. He was back in a moment. "Damned if there isn't. It was stolen yesterday." His voice rose. "*Now how did you—?*"

Kearny hung up abruptly, seized his hat, and headed for the elevator. By God, if this was a joke, the boys

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had put in enough work on it; he couldn't poop the party.

At the hotel lounge he decided: joke or no joke, whatever this was, he liked it. When she looked up at him, he noted that the dark blue suit matched her eyes. They were large and lustrous and refused to be dimmed by the short veil she wore. So did her glow-red lips that smiled with mildly wry humor.

"Did you expect me to be hooded and cloaked?" she asked. She did not slide over to make room for him to sit beside her. Kearny took the seat on the opposite side of the banquette.

"I don't know what I expected," he said, and then impulsively, "But you're beautiful!"

She inclined her head gracefully at the compliment, but said rather dryly, "I can see you're upgrading me to a feature in the Sunday magazine."

"Please don't," said Kearny. "I left my byline in the office. I'm just a guy buying a drink for a lovely stranger-well-met." He signaled the waiter for two martinis. "Let me begin by introducing myself a little more properly. John Allen Kearny."

"How do you do?"

"The custom is to reply with your own name."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't. That's one of the — other things — I don't have."

Kearny gave her a long look. "Your mother's name was Summerfield."

"All I know about Prudence Summerfield is what the old Ritter woman used to tell, and that wasn't much." She shrugged. "Certainly no one ever told me that the name had been passed on to me."

Kearny consulted his martini, wondering if all this was really happening. What the hell; for the time being he would simply suspend disbelief.

"Look," he began. "Tell me—"

"No. You tell me first. Tell me how you learned about me. How you tracked me to my lair."

"Fair enough," he said, and he did, recounting his interview with Auntie Ritter, his subsequent investigations, his wild deductions and even wilder surmises. "It was unbelievable," he concluded, "but I couldn't get the idea out of my head. While I was talking to the people involved, and poking through old newspapers. I really felt I was right. But here in the city, sitting here and looking at you, I realize how silly the whole thing is. Certainly everybody else thinks it is. Everybody on the *Herald* — even the store dick at Stratton's."

"Yes, how *did* you link me with Stratton's?" she asked.

"Well, it seemed to me that an in— that a lady in that situation would naturally gravitate to a big city, where everybody doesn't know everybody else, and this was the closest one. Then, since she had to have food, clothes, necessities — well, there they were for the taking, all in one place. And I knew about the plague of thefts — of things missing at Stratton's. It

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wasn't conclusive, but I decided to give it a try."

"I found your note in a handbag. A good one. I admire your taste." She smiled and sipped her drink. "But really, did you think I had haunted Stratton's all my life? It was something of a fluke that you found me there. I've lived other places, too. Some of my best years were provided by Harrod's in London. But then they brought in a pack of Dobermans for watchdogs, and I had to leave. I wonder what brought me back here, just at the time you uncovered my secret."

Kearny's head was swimming, and it wasn't the martini's doing. "I'm still in the dark," he said, half to himself. "You wouldn't be here talking to me if there weren't some truth in Auntie Ritter's fool notion. But there couldn't be. Yet you go on talking like you're — just what she said you were."

She gave him a calculating look. "You've been watching me closely ever since you sat down," she said. "Haven't you noticed anything about me — different from other people?"

"Well ... you're far prettier than most. Chic. Svelte. I've been watching you because I enjoy it."

"Come on. Look harder."

"Your eyes. When you talk, your face changes expression, but your eyes stay — aloof. They don't smile or—"

"They can't. They're not eyes."

Kearny gave a start that almost flipped the twist of lemon peel out of his glass.

"You're doubtless familiar with H.G. Wells's character," she said. "He has become so famous as The Invisible Man that people have forgotten he ever had a name."

"Griffin," said Kearny. "No, don't look impressed. I dug up the book and reread it, when I — when I got interested in this matter."

"Well, I came across that novel early in my life, and it became practically my handbook on how to survive in a visible world. Except that Mr. Griffin had to bundle up in bandages, false nose, and all that. In this day and age, disguise is rather easier. And of course my being a woman helps."

Kearny was still staring dumbly at her.

"My face is a mask of makeup — pancake, rouge, lipstick — mascara on the lashes, penciled brows, and so on. The invisible Mr. Griffin had to wear dark goggles; I can raid an optician's office for contact lenses. Perhaps you know that some contacts cover the whole eyeball, for people with cataracts or whatnot, and are made in lifelike colors. I can wear a costume to match my eyes, or vice versa. Isn't that nice?"

"Yes. Nice," said Kearny huskily.

"My teeth are porcelainized with a sort of polish that actors use to give themselves piano smiles. And there's a dentifrice which contains a dye to tint the gums a healthy pink. For the rest, well, a wisp of veil is always good insurance. And I usually stage-manage

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the lighting of any setting where I expect to be under scrutiny. Here, for instance; cocktail lounges are always dim."

"This is fantastic," muttered Kearny.

"In your investigation of unsolved crimes, perhaps you came across one that puzzled New York police a few years ago. The theft from a perruquier's workroom of three exquisitely made wigs, valued at some three thousand dollars apiece. I'm wearing the brunette one this afternoon. And from the head down? A pancake or liquid cosmetic serves even for low-cut gowns, though it does tend to powder onto the front of my dancing partners. The right shade of nylons and I have legs. Unfortunately I haven't yet found a substitute for gloves."

She held out one hand, sheathed in a skintight pale blue glove, with a single dramatic ring worn on the outside. "If you are still collecting crimes," she said parenthetically, "Van Cleef and Arpel would like to know the whereabouts of that solitaire."

"This is incredible!" Kearny choked out. "I'm at home in bed asleep. You're not—"

"Invisible? Yes I am, but I'm not going to prove it here."

"It's impossible! How?"

"Whatever I'm made of, it's just like your flesh, bones, skin and the rest — except that it doesn't refract, reflect, diffract, disperse or polarize light. At least to no more degree than the empty air does. Naked, in a smoky room or a heavy fog, I can dimly be seen as a sort of bubble, woman-shaped."

"And shapely," Kearny managed to comment.

"Yes," she said simply. "I stand five feet, four inches tall and weigh usually about one-twelve, so my molecular density or whatever it is must be the same as a normal human's. I don't live on moonbeams and spindrift; I take human nourishment and I adore an occasional martini. But my digestive processes are supernormally rapid. Anything I eat is quickly assimilated and sublimated, so that I'm invisible again in no time."

Kearny had already waved to the waiter for another round of drinks. "Here," he said. "Assimilate."

"Of course, invisibility is not always invulnerability," she went on. "Dogs can scent my presence — which is why I left Harrod's to the Dobermans. It goes without saying that cleanliness is next to invisibleness; a smudge on my nose could cause worse than embarrassment. Also" — she lifted the glass — "I'm partial to vodka out of necessity. Minimum after-odor. We thieves think of everything."

Kearny stared at her woozily. "You simply couldn't be making all this up on the spur of the moment."

"There is one other physical peculiarity; a nice one for me. I don't know what kind of metabolism I've inherited, but it's encouragingly ageless. I'm thirty-some years old, but I have

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the body and complexion I had at half that age. After wearing this cosmetic mask so often and so long, I should have wrinkles and jowls down to my chest. But my face is still firm and youthful, and so is the rest of me. I don't know whether I have the life expectancy of Auntie Ritter — or half that, or ten times that — but I do believe that I will look just as young as I do now for a comfortably long time."

"Well...." Kearny floundered momentarily. "Haven't you wondered — tried to find out — how you got this way?"

"Lord, haven't I! But my researches never came to much. If this were the seventeenth century, I could maintain that I was sired by a warlock or an incubus. Or if this were one of those science-horror movies, you could draw complex equation and prove that I'm a poor misplaced Venusian, and then you'd be bombard me with fafoolnik rays and I'd become visible and we'd live happily ever after."

She ran out of breath and humor simultaneously, and her face lost its brief animation.

"The only clue I have, if it *is* a clue, is that there was an unusual display of celestial fireworks the year I was born. Meteors or something. UFOs, maybe? If my mother had lived ... but no. I don't think she could have explained. She protested to her dying day that she was innocent of any wrongdoing. I imagine she was somehow taken advantage of. Who or what did it, no one will ever know." She smiled whimsically. "That's a new concept, isn't it — extraterrestrial lechers?"

"Whoever or whatever you are," Kearny said admiringly, "you have certainly adapted."

"I had to. The Ritter woman gave me a sort of left-handed bringing-up, as long as she was able, and as long as I was able to stand it. I was a curiosity to her, in much the same way as if she'd found pumpkins growing on one of her apple trees — and she regarded me just about that impersonally. So I found myself on my own. I was a young animal, a wild cub, in a jungle where I didn't know the laws, or have any landmarks to steer by, or a single other of my species to learn from. I had only the one advantage: nobody else in the jungle knew I was there."

Kearny felt a stirring of pity for the lost little girl she had been.

"I taught myself to read; I had to. I acquired some knowledge of medicine; I had to. No one else could doctor me. Oh, it would take too long for me to tell you all I learned or collected or stole, to prepare myself for your world. Let me just point out that I had unlimited entrée everywhere, from hobo camps to the Library of Congress. I got quite a liberal education, and I could be fabulously wealthy today if I stole just to hoard."

"But you've never confided in anybody?" Kearny asked. "Never needed an arm to lean on or a shoulder to cry on?"

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She shook her head. "You are learning more about me right now than I've ever told to another soul. No, I never had a real friend. It seemed to me that I had been given a gift of great value — this invisibility, this absolute freedom — and that I'd be cheapening it if I revealed myself or bound myself to any ordinary person. It meant loneliness, but...."

She took a fortifying sip of her martini.

"When I was very little I had playmates. They envied me, you know, but they didn't spurn me as a freak. And their parents humored what they thought was an innocent fantasy. Every child that age has a Peter Pan or a pet leprechaun. But time went by; the parents started telling them, 'You're too big now for childishness like that.' And — isn't it funny? — my playmates began not to believe in me. That was the first heartbreak. But it made me realize that I *was* different, apart, alone. I've stayed apart and alone ever since."

"But ... a beautiful girl like you. There must have been men."

"Oh, I've had more suitors than Penelope. I used to dream — the way other girls dream of a Prince Charming — that I'd find another someone like me. Someone male and strong, who had already solved all the problems and would show me the way. I've looked for him, too, more desperately than any other girl ever looked for Mr. Right. I'm sure I'd know, if I ever met another invisible. But in all my wanderings I never have."

Kearny asked, "There's never been even a, er, brief romance?"

"You mean," she said, "am I still a virgin?"

Kearny dropped his gaze and turned pink, thinking confusedly: this is my day for turning pink.

"No," she said. "I'm not."

Kearny kept his eyes down.

"So now," she went on, "I daresay you're trying to visualize that scene."

It was Kearny's day for turning maroon.

"He was a blind boy," she said very quietly. "The first one. Visualize *that*. Since then, with other men, I've always pretended to be neurotically modest, and insisted on absolute pitch darkness."

Kearny squirmed. He was grateful for the ensuing long silence, long enough for him to regain some measure of self-possession. At last, he cleared his throat and said, "You'll hardly find a soul mate in a department store. Not after closing time, anyway."

"Dear Mr. Kearny, I haven't *lived* in department stores, any more than you live in your newspaper's pressroom. I admit they're handy as sources of supply. But I have had my penthouses, my villas and châteaux. I've been to Europe often, to South America, to the Orient — with and without passports. Believe me, I have acquired knowledge, and enough skills, that I suppose I could go to work like an

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honest woman and give up my sordid life of crime. I've done some fashion styling, for instance, and designing. And I'm sure I'd make a superb Mata Hari. But I have other pursuits. And when I steal, I do it for fun as much as any other reason."

Kearny made vaguely disapproving noises.

"My whole life hasn't been one long roster of crimes, either," she went on. "Invisibility has its prankish side. I'll never forget a masquerade ball in Venice once. At midnight, when we all unmasked, I dropped *everything*. Wow. Stampede."

Kearny chuckled, then asked, "What did you mean by the 'other pursuits' you have?"

"Just that I haven't neglected the promise and possibilities of my situation. Within limits, I can wear any identity I choose. I can and I have and I do. You've seen me on the six o'clock news, in the papers, the newsmagazines, with varying names and faces. Some of them, I immodestly submit, rather famous ones." She grinned impishly. "You even interviewed me once yourself — but I won't remind you where, or who I was."

"Great guns," muttered Kearny.

"In addition to my one most distinctive advantage, and my facility at makeup. I think I can say that I'm more than adept at womanly wiles. With this armory, I can be the woman behind the throne — or reserve my own seat at summit conferences. I was *the* liberated woman long before women's lib was ever heard of."

"If I remember rightly," Kearny said, "the invisible Mr. Griffin brought on his own downfall through his lust for power."

"But he thought like a man, in terms of force. I may be tainted with the same ambition, but I am thrice armed and thrice invincible. I am an invisible woman."

The words had a chill, sharp edge. Kearny felt distinctly uncomfortable. He had interviewed her once — as what celebrity or personage? His mind ranged backward over a succession of state occasions, awards dinners, forums, premieres, presentations ... and he realized, with growing unease, that she could have been a leading light at a good many of them.

"I can understand," he said cautiously, "how you would feel like an outsider. And how you could take advantage. But you make it sound so cold and calculated. So — amoral."

She gazed at him over the rim of her glass, and her only reply was a quotation: "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."

"You don't feel you've let down your guard by telling me all this?"

She laughed. "You've done one good deed for the day, if you want to feel you've accomplished something. I won't risk plundering Stratton's again. But, for the rest — there's no earthly way you can interfere with my career. I haven't given you any blueprints of

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my plans; you don't know me by any of my aliases; there's no story you can tell that anyone would believe."

"Nothing further from my mind," he assured her. "I wish you every success. In conquering the world or whatever else you're out for. But right now it's dinnertime. Can we have it together?"

"I haven't distressed you with all my *homo superior* talk?"

"Nope. I knew you were superior the instant I laid eyes on you. And now I can't just let you vanish out of my life. If you'll pardon the expression."

"You're sweet, Mr. Kearny," she said, and stood up. "Let me go and repair my camouflage." She smile inscrutably and left him.

Kearny sat and toyed with the dregs of his cocktails, thinking mixed thoughts. Had he really heard that impossible story? Was there really such a girl? Yes; there was her martini glass. Then was she what she claimed to be? Or was this a complicated leg-pulling that he hadn't caught on to yet? One sneaky piece of his mind half-hoped that it was. Because that would prove her real and ordinary, and he suddenly wanted her to be real and ordinary. Vulnerable. Possessable.

Because, if you believed it all....

This woman was no helpless victim of a supernatural disability. She had the outlook of a marauding khan and the potential of a primeval force. Talk about women's lib! Well, maybe he could — could *soften* her. It would be fun trying. Daydreaming thus, he could almost feel the kiss of invisible lips on his cheek.

Next moment there was a touch on his arm and he turned expectantly, but it was merely a pudgy little woman who turned out to be the ladies' room attendant.

"Excuse me, mister," she said. "Your lady friend forgot these here parcels."

Kearny found himself holding a shopping bag containing, among other items, the dark blue linen suit, neatly folded. He rummaged desperately through the bag, but there was not even a note.

For some time he sat tragically regarding her empty cocktail glass across the table. It had a faint kiss of her lip rouge on its rim. After a while, he got up and went to his office, and began to write the story.

It began: "Somewhere in the world, this very day...."

And it began: "When the next election rolls around, beware...."

And it began: "Men, how well do you really know the woman you love...?"

After another while, he gave it up and went out for more martinis.

He never mentioned her again and she never came back — except once, briefly, many years afterward, when Kearny was a very old man, and then nobody believed him.

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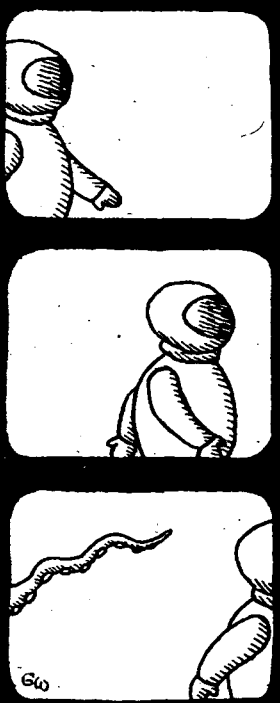
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



MORE (AND LESS) MESS MEDIA

Last month I noted that it was unfair to judge the series *Wizards and Warriors* on the basis of only two episodes, no matter how horrendous they were, and that a followup was due. And that, again no matter how horrendous, the series was important as the first major manifestation of a sword-and-sorcery (or heroic fantasy, as you will) series in prime time, and its success and quality might well dictate what else might come in that direction.

So, here, a second view, based on the cumulative thoughts inspired by several more episodes. My intial objections still hold. The determinedly contemporary cuteness sets my teeth on edge (Prince Greystone to two of Blackpool's warriors — "You still don't get the picture, do you?"); it takes a T.H. White to carry off that kind of anachronism with any style. And this, in turn, pretty much negates any of the wonder and beauty which is a major ingredient in fantasy for many of us. Heroes and heroines that spend the major part of their time cracking jokes and/or acting like just regular Modern American folks don't have much of the glamorous charisma one expects from the major characters in fantasy.

This, in turn, brings on a reaction which I have seldom, if ever, felt before in any medium. Prince Greystone is tedious and hearty and downright middle-aged, which might be meant to

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be as much of a joke as the Princess Ariel's self-centered JAP act. But the results are that I found myself around the third or fourth episode actively rooting for the villains to get rid of this dreary pair ("Please, just throw her to the nasty thing and get her *out* of here," I was thinking). I was appalled; that is carrying a joke too far. But the villains are too obviously more handsome, more intelligent, and more sensitive. (Blackpool is moved to tears by the success of a deadly new weapon, which seems a terrible thing until you realize that Greystone couldn't be moved to tears by *anything*.) The side of the good guys is brightened only by Marko, Greystone's inevitably strong but none-too-bright companion, who is boon to the point of suspicion but manages to be appealing despite being on the right side.

But (here it is, folks — the rare sight of a critic backing down, if only slightly), I must admit that I've gotten rather fond of all this silliness, and there are things to be said for it. Prince Blackpool, witch Bethel, and sorcerer Vector are magnetic villains. The costumes are often handsome and sometimes witty, like tiny Ariel's enormously horned medieval headdress. And I like the major artifact of wizardry being a magic monocle.

The effects are usually small-scaled, but not insulting. There was a nice one of the cave that turns out to be a large somebody's mouth; the various demons and necessary nasty things that threaten the good guys are done with some imagination. Vector comes and goes with casual nonchalance and the implication of a glowing purple space warp. The sets, on the other hand, frequently have the look of those rocks that used to come with your model train set, though there's a very atmospheric opening shot of the castle of Baaldorf.

Marko's talent of being able to speak to animals while rarely if ever managing to get any useful information out of them is part of his charm. And while most of the tries at anachronistic humor fall flat, every once in a while one comes off, as when Ariel, on learning that they're all going to be blown to bits in the morning by yet another secret weapon of Blackpool's, hurries off, saying "I'd better go tell Mother — she just started to read the first part of a trilogy."

Things would have gotten off to a better start if, as noted last month, the network had condescended to show us the first episode, which established the whole situation, first, instead of the second. And W&W is, basically, pretty jejeune and comic strippy. But the bottom line is still (pay attention — this is a major statement of reviewing policy), not whether something is childish or adult, or intelligent or dumb, or well or badly done, or even good or bad (whatever they are), but whether it's dull or interesting. And *Wizards and Warriors* distracts and amuses me enough to keep me watch-

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ing. And what more do you ask from prime time TV — there's so little there that does even that.

For instance, a show that doesn't is (maybe — hopefully — *was* by the time this sees print) a series called *Small & Frye.* The gimmick here is a detective who, due to some sort of lab accident (which is only mentioned more or less in passing in the introductory material), periodically shrinks to the dimension of an undersized Ken doll. In the premiere episode (a shrinking pilot if ever there was one), which was certainly the only one I had the stomach to sit through, it wasn't even made clear as to what triggers this or whether it is done voluntarily or just comes on like a fit of the vapors.

The plot (what shameful things hide behind that word) was something to do with a violinist with an inordinate attachment to his violin, which he thought to be a Stradivarius; the climax (another word used loosely) had our unSanforized hero trapped in the violin during a concert. Where is the helpful tarantula from *The Incredible Shrinking Man* when we need him?

Small & Frye is one of those half-hour shows which you finish wondering where the time went, *not* because it passes so quickly when you're having fun, but because it is staggering that so little could be encompassed in that space of time. One has seen detergent commercials with more content than this (and wittier dialogue); an episode of, say, *M*A*S*H* that takes the same half hour seems like *Gone With the Wind* in comparison.

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Here is the first of two superior stories we have from a new writer who tells us: "I'm a writer/producer of industrial shows. I just started writing fiction in the past few years and have sold stories to Twilight Zone *and* Playboy. *34 years old, wife Laurie, son Colin, writing every day, both loving it and loathing it, depending on how easily the words come..."*

A Scent of the Soul

BY

CHET WILLIAMSON

The body lay open before her. The heart still pumped blood, sending it shooting out in red jets; the brain still functioned so that the man knew enough, felt enough to scream before the needle she wielded brought him peace. Even as she pulled the syringe out and away from his skin, fish-belly white in the dazzling lights of the emergency room, she felt as though she were gloved and shod with lead while around her the others were quicksilver.

"*Move!*" an intern grunted, and Trina backed away, letting the man enter the victim with his hands, pressing and prodding as if force alone could keep the life within.

"Here!" he jerked his head to her. "Press...." She did, but her movements were light, tentative, and a gout of blood leapt forth as if mocking her caution. "*Hard!*" the intern yelled as he sought to seal another rupture in the tattered fabric of life on the metal table.

The motion continued around her as she pushed. She could feel the heart fighting her, trying to force the life-blood past her once more, while nurses and doctors scurried, she thought oddly, like carrion birds desperate for a tender bit of flesh.

Then the intern said softly, "Goddamn," and again, "Goddamn."

"We're losing him," another nurse murmured.

And as the blood pulsed more lightly against the gauze she held, fluttered, and finally stopped, she became aware of an aroma, just a hint of true sweetness that overrode the salty sweetness of blood and the sour smell of the body's burst vessels. It rose upward from the corpse, growing stronger and stronger until it blotted out her other senses, and it seemed as if she stood in

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darkness with that odor of ineffable sweetness the only reality.

"*Trina!*"

It was Diane's voice that brought her back, and she felt a wave of anger at the interruption. Her nostrils widened, seeking the fragrance once more, but it was gone, elusive as the life that had just passed from the raw heap of mortality that lay on the cold table.

"Are you all right?" Now both Dr. Grady and Diane were looking at her with concern.

"I'm fine," she answered, and gave a half-smile as proof.

"Little light-headed, huh?" grinned Grady. "This is your first?"

"My first...?"

"First death. First one you've seen?"

Trina nodded. The three of them stepped aside as the orderlies took command. There was little ceremony, no wires to detach, no tubes to pluck away. There'd been too little time to even begin. It was merely a case of load, haul, and clean.

"I've ... seen bodies," Trina said. "But never seen anyone die before."

Grady nodded brusquely. "It's rough," he said, "but you get used to it like anything else." He shook his head. "But yeah, it's rough to see that life go. That's one thing the pathologists and undertakers and other meat boys have on us. They can be callous because they never see that moment when the transition occurs. They get death prepackaged. They don't see it happen." He shook himself then like a dog shaking off water. "Jesus, I'm waxing philosophical today. You two wanta get washed up and join me for a coffee and a smoke?"

Diane laughed lightly. It was easier now that the body was gone. "And you a doctor."

Trina didn't join them. After she changed into a clean uniform, she went into the supply room and sat for a while on a hard-backed metal chair. She often went there during her breaks. The lunchroom, with its machines full of spaghetti cans and coffee and soda endlessly clanking and whirring, not to mention the interns and nurses sitting around talking and laughing, seemed uncomfortable to her, even threatening. It seemed a sacrilege to be laughing in this building, as full of death as it was.

When she'd first wanted to be a nurse, she'd never thought of a hospital in that way. It had always seemed a shrine, a place of healing. Of course patients died; it was inevitable. But the closest she'd come to that before nursing school was the occasional glimpse of a grieving family in the lobby, from which one thoughtfully turned away.

Becoming a nurse had changed all that. She felt steeped in death. From high school English she remembered the vestal virgins of the ancient temples, serving the gods, dressed in immaculate white. She was to have been one of those, serving Aesculapius, the god of healing — but instead she found herself entering the temple of Pluto, of

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Shiva, of Osiris, the gods of the dead, who reveled in the things she saw and heard — the sheeted gurney stealthily wheeled from guest room to basement at dead of night; the surgeons in the scrub room stripping off their gloves and cursing at tissues too rotted to hold life; the occasional scream from a distant hall as a terminal case finally *knows*, finally glimpses the dark.

She had expected these things, but she had not reckoned with the force of them. There were those who survived, of course, who were pushed smiling on wheelchairs to the front door, where they rose to walk among the living once more. They far outnumbered those who *stilly* remained. But the lead were the teaspoon of bile in Trina's cup of sweetness, so that the taste was always bitter.

Until today, when that odor wafted up from the man as his life ended, as his soul ascended....

His soul.

Was that what it had been, that bit of perfumed grace whose beauty had stunned her into immobility? If so, then she could go on. If death was so sweet, so *worthy*, if it was a passing into eternity, like incense into the faces of gods, then she could bear it and more.

Then she could worship.

She made it a point from then on to be on emergency room duty as much as possible. The cases came in as steadily as ever — burn victims, abrasions, lacerations, an auto accident victim whose leg dangled by a flap of flesh — but none died in her presence. They survived or, more disappointingly, chose to pass in the operating rooms, to which Trina's years and experience had not yet admitted her. She saw D.O.A.s by the dozens, but could detect no trace of the ethereal scent as they were quickly wheeled past, and started to wonder if her previous epiphany had been an illusion.

Just as her depression was growing once more to the point where she was ready to request a return to the bedpan and blankets route, the Cuban came in. She heard him first, a string of Spanish spoken through what sounded like a bubble pipe. When she turned and saw him, she screamed. Some thought later that he had walked through the midnight streets to the hospital door. Others swore that was impossible in his condition, that he had to have been driven and pushed out of the car at the door by someone who wished to remain unknown, yet wished to give him a chance at life.

There was no chance at all. From the waist up, his body was a nightmare in red and black; and below his stomach, most of his clothes had been burned away. He collapsed as Trina's scream faded. The interns were over him like white gulls on a dead fish, and Trina, her quest momentarily forgotten, knelt with them, waiting for instructions. The Cuban's body shivered, jerked, and stiffened, then seemed to collapse into itself as if only

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will had kept it from becoming ashes.

As it did so, a scent filled Trina's senses, a spicy-sweet aroma that drove away the pungent odor of charred flesh. In another second the room, the doctors, the burned body were all gone, and it seemed as if she stood alone in a vast hall whose walls leaped up and became one with the sky. Far overhead a dark form hovered like a black sheet of unimaginable size flowing in the upper winds. The odor of the escaping soul was *visible* now, wispy tendrils that were no color yet all colors, floating up and up the walls of the temple until they reached the God-shape above, under whose plane they sheltered. At last, when the strands of soul all pressed against the hovering blackness, it folded in on itself, the center remaining unmoving while the edges curved toward the earth, curling down and in until it was a great soft sphere in the sky that vanished like an exploding sun.

And she was back in the white room once more, the odor gone, the vision faded, back to the smell of crisped flesh and the spattering sounds of a nurse vomiting on the tile floor. She knew only that she had seen what she had seen. The sight of that awesome ceremony, that yielding up of the soul to that great ebony form was as real as the odor had been, both then and the first time. And she was the only one who knew the truth of it, who had seen, who had *heard*, and she trembled ecstatically at the wonder and the mystery.

Yes, there had been sound. She remembered faintly. It had been a dull roaring, like a thousand voices chanting in a long-forgotten rhythm. But when the soul had disappeared into the folds of the darkness, the sound had stopped, leaving a silence even deeper than when, as a young girl, she had dragged her pillow beneath her covers at dead of night and pressed it over her ears so as not to hear the breathing of the things that surrounded her bed.

To hear that roaring again, to see and smell the river of the freed soul, became her only goal. Emergency, she decided, was too chancy, too unpredictable for her purposes. There would always be deaths there, but they would occur infrequently. Better to seek a more steady and less accidental base, to base, to seek patients who *would* die.

She requested assignment to what the interns and nurses called (out of supervisory hearing) Death Valley, a long hall on the fifth floor where patients who had no hope but resurrection were invariably placed. It was filled with cancer patients in the final stages of the disease, the elderly whose bodies had surrendered to the years, and patients in general whose mind's will to live had been usurped by an unrelenting body's will to die.

Trina became an object of attention the first night she was on, for instead of drinking coffee and reading magazines at the nurses' station, she walked the halls with a beeper, listening for signs of distress.

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"Jesus," one young nurse sneered. "Who's she, Florence Nightingale?"

The head nurse on the shift frowned. "Don't knock her, Marci. You could do with a little more devotion to duty yourself."

"Bullshit," said Marci. "Hey, they ring, I'll answer."

While the two argued, Trina passed like a wraith from door to door, most of which were open. Snores, whines, and occasional moans were the litany of Death Valley, and she grew sick at heart as she passed the rooms, turned, and passed again.

She paused outside one room shared by an old woman and a housewife in her mid-thirties. Both were nearly crushed by cancer. Trina's eyes widened imperceptibly as the odor struck her. It was light, barely there, but unmistakable in its significance. She glanced down the hall, then entered the room stealthily on her rubber soles.

It was the old woman. The younger one, nearer the door, was breathing regularly in spite of the renegade cells that had nearly completed their feast. But the woman by the window was dying quickly, her breath coming in brief, quiet, irregular puffs. She had already lapsed into coma.

Trina bent over the bed. In the pale light from the hall she could see the old woman's face, skin stretched over bone like yellowed newspaper over sticks. The chin pushed upward, trembled, and fell, and the soul came rushing out, inches from Trina's expectant features.

It was like draining the wine glass after testing the bouquet, a richer smell than the others, if such was imaginable. It surged into and overwhelmed her, a thick headiness that swept her away to where the dark plane billowed above to envelop the soul as it rose — and now she rose with it, riding up, up into the embrace of the Dark Mother, who enfolded her offering ever so tenderly and passed away like dream dust.

Trina opened her eyes. The odor was gone. The woman was dead. But a hint of sensation remained at the apex of her thighs, and she knew that finally, after twenty-three years and not quite as many men, she had had an orgasm. In the sanctity of her experience she felt no shame, as she had before when she'd been with men. There was purity in this, there was worship. It was a ... what was the word? ... a *boon* from the Dark Mother, for such was how she interpreted the black shadow whose embrace she had felt, whose touch had made her bear such ecstasy.

She left the room then, walking back to the nurses' station, reporting nothing amiss. The 6:00 A.M. shift would find the woman, with no reflection at all on Trina. It had not even been her job to listen, let alone look.

For several weeks afterward she did not catch the scent. It was as if the dying knew of their forthcoming experi-

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ence and wanted to keep it all to themselves, to have no secret sharer in whose presence they would enter the night. Selfish ones, she thought, and her anger against them grew until one night when she, tracing the scent, dashed into a room only to find the soul already fled, the hint mocking her as she stood impotently over the triumphant corpse. It was then that she determined to become the cause of death, the priestess of the Dark Mother.

She battled quickly with her morals, not so much slaying them as coming to an easy truce. If death, she argued, is beautiful beyond imagining, and if death is inevitable for those in this wing, then where is the sin? It was in fact virtuous to alleviate their suffering and bring them into such a beatific state. Oh yes. It was good.

She killed a man the following week, a frail, tired, half-corpse already. She had thought for several days about the most expedient, painless, and indetectable method, and had decided on smothering. There would be indications left inside the body, that was true. But the pathologists, even if there were a post-mortem, as was usual, would not be looking for those particular secrets. It would appear to be a natural death, with billions of tiny killers rather than one full-sized one.

He died easily, almost welcoming it at the end, wiry hands raised in benediction as the soul burst joyously from the ravaged body, bathing her with orgiastic serenity that left her wilted. There was never a question about the death afterward, so two weeks later she killed again, and again there was no suspicion. At last she did it once a week, and it became a regular part of her life, like Mary's Saturday night pickup, or Dot's Friday happy hour, but more gloriously fulfilling than either of those or the dozen other hollow games Trina watched them all play as if to convince themselves their lives were worth the living.

Also, hers was safer. Many people died each week in Death Valley, and one more or less wasn't noticed. What difference if a man dies Tuesday or Friday? No one really cared. Not the doctors, who hated to see their failures linger; not the nurses, whose efficiency often defeated their humanity; and not the relatives, who were spared more days of expense and worry.

It was a perfect situation for Trina, and she had every intention of continuing indefinitely, until she was reassigned to the children's ward.

"We're shorthanded," Miss Gates said. "Two girls left this past week, one to get married, and one to St. Luke's. It's a challenging ward, difficult at times, but I think you'll enjoy it."

Trina doubted it. Her first week there was maddening. Older people knew how to suffer; children didn't. As for her offerings to the Dark Mother, it was nearly impossible here. The children were looked after impeccably,

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and even had they not been, Trina felt hesitant about snuffing out lives so short, so unlived. It would be an unworthy gift, she thought. And then the Bryan girl died.

She'd had a brain tumor that had been operated on that morning, had gone through the recovery room with flying colors, and was placed, mildly sedated, back in her bed. But something went wrong that evening, and Trina heard Miss Gates call her name. She ran to the child's room and saw the girl lying pale and nearly lifeless. Miss Gates barked orders at her, and she ran to get what was needed as the intercom calmly requested the presence of the doctor on duty.

When Trina returned to the room the smell hit her even before she could enter, and she passed through the door as if in a trance. She hardly saw Miss Gates shake her head, only dimly heard the murmured "too late" before she was gone, borne away on the nearly unbearable sweetness of the child's soul.

It was as if all that had gone before had been pale and feeble, diluted by years of battering and corrupting life. But here all was pure, all was whiteness and innocence and grace unsullied by experience, unmarked by sin. The tendrils of the soul flew upward like little fingers reaching for a mother's arms, and Trina was with it, part of it, as the great blackness, the Dark Mother, enveloped all, and she felt herself merge, blending not only with the soul, but now with the Dark Mother herself, until she *was* the Dark Mother, holding fast within her all the deep nectars of the souls she had absorbed, and all the rich mysteries of death, sailing across endless skies in eternal glory.

Then it was gone, all except a child lying dead in a bed, and Miss Gates looking at her so oddly that Trina wondered what she had said or done to give herself away. But after a moment, Miss Gates only smiled sadly and said, "Poor little thing," and Trina knew it was all right.

When she returned to her apartment as the sun was rising, she began to think of how to continue the experience she'd had in the Bryan girl's room. That evening she read the medical charts for all the children in the ward, and narrowed them down to three whose deaths would not be unexpected.

It was two weeks before she found the opportunity and the courage to do it. The child had a rare strain of leukemia. In the ward the nurses called him "The Singer" because, despite the certain knowledge that he would die before the year was out, he was in little pain and sang incessantly, wordless tuneless melodies that Trina had found slightly irritating at first. But gradually they became consolingly pleasant, like a monk's chant in a Buddhist temple.

Over coffee one night, Miss Gates unwittingly provided Trina with the impetus to go ahead. "I'm afraid our little singer won't be singing much longer," she said.

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Trina looked up with curious concern.

"They've started him on very heavy radiation," Miss Gates continued. "I told Dr. Staley I didn't think the boy could handle it, but he said it was the only thing left."

"Will the patient die soon, do you think?"

Miss Gates nodded. "His parents won't have him on a machine. They say there's no point in making him suffer more. They even balked at the treatments, but I suppose they figured a chance is a chance." She shook her head. "He'll die anyway. And he's got no life now."

"I just realized," Trina said, "I didn't hear him singing tonight."

"No. I imagine we won't anymore." She sighed. "Sometimes it seems the more we know, the more pain we cause. I hope it's in his sleep. Softly and pleasantly." She stood abruptly. "Well, I've got work to do."

Trina watched as Miss Gates padded down the hall toward the storeroom. When she had disappeared, Trina looked at the room charts. The boy who'd been roomed with The Singer had left the day before, and he'd received no new roommate. He would be all alone. Maybe she could do it so gently that he'd never awaken. She hoped so.

She met no one as she passed down the brightly lit halls. The doors of the rooms were nearly all opened, and night-lights burned in all but a few. There was such a light in the room the little boy occupied, and for a moment before she entered Trina gazed at it, a redly gleaming face of Mickey Mouse against a smoky white background. She came into the room, pushing the door behind her until no one passing in the hall could look in and see her, a visitor at midnight beside a dying child's bed. Then she crossed to the far side, where she could see the falling shadow of anyone who approached the room.

The boy's head was off the pillow, which she picked up gingerly, fearing to disturb him. His face looked beautiful in the ruddy light, his paleness transcended into a robust glow, the blond curls, as yet untouched by the radiation, sparkling as on a bust molded in bright copper. His mouth was opened slightly, showing clean white teeth. Only his breathing seemed wrong. It whistled between his lips in an irregular rhythm, like some tiny crazed teakettle. She touched his forehead. It was warm, not unpleasantly so. Full of life, that was it, life that so very soon would end in misery and horrible pain.

But she could prevent that. She could be the angel who would save him from the fate, who could send his sweet young soul winging upward, joyfully, into the love of the Dark Mother. She leaned over and kissed the smooth cheek, then pressed the pillow firmly upon the upturned face.

The little chest moved first, jerking in a frenzied spasm. Then the arms be-

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gan to flail weakly, and the legs kicked beneath the light covers while the muscles of the neck sought to slither the head out from under the unseen object that was obstructing the lungs. The entire body arched and stretched and buckled, and then quite suddenly began to relax like a spring quickly uncoiled. Trina could sense the first trace of the odor as it seeped into her conciousness. Her arms kept pressing the pillow down, but the rest of her body and her mind surrendered to the oncoming tide that would propel both her and the child into ultimate bliss. It was growing now, filling her up with its purity and delight. The Dark Mother was there overhead, so huge it was as if it had become the sky, world, universe, and she would be one with it.

Then a beam of harsh fluorescent light and a rasping voice struck her like twin thunderbolts. "What are you doing!"

She turned, half-possessed, to find Miss Gates standing in the doorway, a look of shocked surprise on her tired old face.

"What are you *doing!*" she repeated, voice trembling.

The images were wrenched brutally from Trina's mind. She could feel the rich, dark emotions rip outward from her until they were one with the night, and all that was left was fury at the blasphemer, at the defiler of the ceremony. She became a starving animal whose meal has been stolen away, and she responded in kind, scuttling over the body of the child and hurling herself at Miss Gates, who met the attack with a wiry strength that startled the younger woman and pushed her back over the bed. A bony elbow pinned her across the neck, while a white-knuckled hand dipped into a pocket and rose again over Trina's body. In the second before it descended, Trina could see that the hand held a syringe, whose bright needle winked at her as it fell and pierced her uniform, her skin, and the fatty tissue of her breast directly over her heart.

As the contents of the syringe flowed into her, she felt her muscles go limp, and the arm pull away from her throat. She lay helpless, unable to move, looking into the frightened yet commanding face of Miss Gates looming darkly over her like a moon in eclipse. Her hands and feet felt cold for a second, and then there was no feeling at all. It was when the cold had begun to climb up her arms and legs that she thought she knew the truth.

The syringe was the answer. Miss Gates had been there, if not from the same motive, then for the same purpose as Trina. The syringe had been meant for the child, to spare him the days or weeks of torture ahead. But she had used it against Trina instead, as the only weapon at hand.

It seemed so *just* that Trina would have smiled had her muscles been able to obey her; that they had both come to kill the child, Miss Gates out of mercy, and she out of worship for the

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Dark Mother she would soon meet and join forever. But she would experience that alone — at least she had that much. There would be no one she would have to share it with, as she had shared the deaths of those others.

Or so she thought until, in the last second of her life, she saw Miss Gates's face above her, poised in intense expectation, her nostrils flared like a hound on track.

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This is the final story in Susan Petrey's series about the vampirish Varkela healers of the Russian steppe, a series that began with "Spareen Among the Tartars," (September 1979).

Spareen and Old Turk

BY

SUSAN C. PETREY

Spareen the Varkela leechman sat in his yurt smoking tobacco with Iskendar Khan one summer's evening. Iskendar Khan's proud Circassian nose threw a hawk's beak shadow on the gray felt wall. He was a wiry little man, a Cherkess from the Caucasus, who had moved to the steppe to avoid a blood feud, adopted a nomadic life, and taken to breeding horses in his old age.

"I can help you win that woman of yours, Spareen," he said, drawing deep on his pipe and allowing the smoke to return through his nose. "If you will capture for me Old Turk, my people will take you on as leechman. You will earn rivers of blood for yourself and your bride."

It was a tempting proposition, thought Spareen, the tips of his were-teeth poking hungrily into his lower lip. His blood thirsting Varkura would certainly like the end result, even if she did not care for the means.

"You must give me time to think it over," he finally said.

Spareen pondered this carefully in his heart for the next few days. Old Turk was almost a legend on the steppe, an exceptional stallion that some claimed had escaped when the Turkish sultan sent some horses as a gift to the czar. Whatever his origin, Old Turk was a magnificent horse of the Arab-Turkmen type, and his offspring invariably inherited the endurance and speed which made him impossible to capture. Sometimes on a clear, moonless night, Spareen, returning from his night's rounds, had seen the old fellow, drifting like a gray ghost above the silvery bear-grass. Sometimes Spareen had called to him in the horse language, but the only answer he received was "No time to visit.

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I want to run." And with a flash of his silvery tail, Old Turk was gone to roam the steppe and bless the mares of rich and poor alike with the bounty of his seed. For what greater joy to the poor steppes nomad after a harsh Russian winter than a few sturdy foals capable of bringing a good price at the yearling market in Astrakhan.

"It's an evil deed, Spareen," said the golden-eyes mare when Spareen went to talk it over with her. "You mustn't do it."

"I agree, it's an evil deed," said Spareen. "But I am unemployed and weary of the quest. Summer is almost over and winter will be on us soon. If I take the khan's offer, I will have enough for myself and Varkura, and if I do not, it wil be a hard winter living from vein to vein, feeding only when people are desperate and sick enough to seek me out. I must do it, evil as it may seem."

"If you do this thing, I shall not speak to you," said the golden-eyes mare.

"Very well," said Spareen. "You never say much that's useful anyhow."

The golden-eyes mare said nothing and seemed to take a sudden interest in a patch of dragon's tooth, tugging briskly with her teeth.

"I will do it," he told the khan the next evening. But his conscience bothered him, for as a Varkela he respected the free, wild stallion of the steppe.

Fighting his better nature, Spareen strode out into the night and began to sing in horse language. He passed a tamarisk hillock and sat down with his back to it. Soon he was rewarded with a clatter of hooves, and the great gray horse, his tail streaming like a banner, came to him. The Old Turk stopped a few inches from Spareen and nosed his chamois-leather shirt.

"What do you want with me?" asked the stallion.

"I would ask a favor of you," said Spareen, and he began to explain his troubles to the Turk. "If you would only allow me to capture you for Iskendar Khan and agree to cover his mares, I would be able to support myself and my woman."

"A pretty proposition for you," said the stallion, "but what about me? Covering mares is all right in its way, but for me to live is to run free."

"Then you won't cooperate?"

"That sharp-fanged woman has turned your head, Spareen. If you were in your right mind you would not ask this of me." And with a switch of his silvery tail, he galloped off into the night.

"You leave me no choice, then," Spareen called, "but to run you down."

The next night Spareen set off with a string of several horses, the best runners in his herd. Finding Old Turk's favorite territory, Spareen staked these horses at five-mile intervals and left them standing: saddled, bridled, and

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ready to ride. By dawn he was ready to begin his search. The golden-eyes mare cantered along the crest of a small hill while Spareen scanned the plain below for any sign of his quarry. The eastern edge of the steppe paled to gold as the sun rose. Spareen took his black eye-cloth out and tied it over his eyes. Then he and the mare descended the hill to the steppe below. It was a fresh morning. Dew glittered on the grasses and the bittersweet smell of sage filled the air.

They rode in a wide circle around the perimeter of the Turk's territory and gradually closed in. By midday they had circumscribed the territory twice without spotting the stallion. Still, the perimeter was many miles long. A horse could hide behind a tamarisk hillock and not be seen.

Spareen dismounted and poured himself a bowl of koumiss from his leathern bag. The warm, sour milk went down easily, and he lay on his back for a while to watch a hawk drifting overhead. Where could the Turk be hiding? Perhaps he was not in his usual range but had moved eastward toward the Caspian.

"Don't you smell his scent on the wind?" he asked the golden-eyes mare. "I was sure I did."

The golden-eyes mare said nothing.

"All right, be that way, then," said Spareen and climbed back into the saddle.

They traveled until the late-afternoon sun was glinting off the distant Caucasus. They had just topped a familiar ridge when Spareen heard a great scrambling of hooves, and Old Turk rolled to his feet from where he'd been caught napping in the tall grasses.

Spareen swore. "He was right under my nose the whole time! I could have passed within one-fourth of a verst and never seen him. No wonder my nose smelled him." In that grassy country a bit of gray on the ground could easily be taken for a stone. Spareen called to the stallion, but received no answer. He urged the golden-eyes mare to follow at a discreet distance, always pressing the stallion toward the east where a fresh horse waited.

They covered five miles that way, until Spareen bounced down from the mare, caught the reins of his next horse and continued the chase. He marveled that the big gray's pace did not slacken as the day wore on into night. Spareen changed mounts three times, and he was still no nearer his quarry.

He knew the gray would have to stop for water soon. His own horse was becoming winded and would also welcome a drink from one of the creeks that flowed into the Terek. Perhaps if the Turk stopped to drink, he would become water-bellied and not able to outpace Spareen's horse.

The moon rose over the steppe, bathing the sage in blue milky light. Old Turk slowed as he came to one of the creeks. Spareen reined in and held back to give the gray a chance to drink his fill. But the Turk merely stopped

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for an instant to take a few swallows and was then off again, quick as ever, eluding Spareen's noose with easy grace.

Two mounts later, in the gray dawn, Spareen admitted defeat and turned back toward camp with his winded horses. In a way he was glad that he had failed. It was a crime to trap such beauty.

When he told Iskendar Khan of his results, the khan was not pleased. Rubbing his hawk's beak, he said:

"Since you are unable, Spareen, perhaps I must hire a good shot to crease that stallion's neck and stun him until we can get a rope on him."

Spareen was appalled. He would never consider creasing a horse, for the margin for error was very narrow. A few inches lower would not merely stun but kill a horse.

"You would risk killing the Turk in order to capture him?" asked Spareen. He didn't like the fire that burned in Iskendar Khan's eyes.

"I must bring Old Turk in to settle my mares — a better breed of horse — that will be my legacy to my sons!" declared the khan. His wealth was in his fat-tailed sheep, but his chief love was his brood of sturdy Turkmen mares carefully selected for their conformation. Spareen could not deny that they were all proud examples of the old Turkmen stock, and he could not blame Iskendar Khan for wanting to breed them to a superior stallion of their own kind. Still he tried to dissuade him.

"You could improve your stock by breeding to the Kabardin stud in the Caucasus," he ventured.

Iskendar Khan made an impatient gesture.

"You know that's not the same," he said.

"Before you damage that worthy horse, give me one more chance at catching him," said Spareen. "I have an idea."

As Spareen left the khan his conscience troubled him. He realized that the last thing he desired was seeing Old Turk a captive in the khan's stud. Still, he couldn't bear the thought that someone might crease the Turk and miss.

That night Spareen selected from his mares the old, sickle-hocked one that was out of milk, for she was in heat. This mare he saddled and rode out into the steppe, far from the habitations of men into the Turk's territory. Finding a likely spot, he staked her out and instructed her to call to any nearby stallion.

The first to arrive was a coarse piebald which Spareen drove away. A few other scrubs came which Spareen also drove off, but finally Old Turk himself cantered in, his tail playing like a banner in the wind. The mare nickered seductively, and Old Turk came up and nosed her neck like a gentleman before mounting her from behind.

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When they had satisfied their desires, the Old Turk turned to go and put his foot right into the noose that Spareen had planted. He reared up and tried to fight the rope, but Spareen jumped up from his hiding place and got another rope around the Turk's rear legs. The great sovereign of the steppes stood helpless as a newborn foal while Spareen surveyed his prize.

Spareen was about to hobble the Turk and put a halter over that proud head, but found he just couldn't do it. It went against his Varkela way of thinking. Finally he untied the ropes and set the great stallion free.

"You must leave this part of the steppe," said Spareen. "For if you stay, Iskendar Khan will surely capture you, or put a bullet through your head trying. If you want to stay free, my advice to you is to leave this territory."

Old Turk snorted and shook out his magnificent mane. "If this is true, then I shall leave this place tonight, for to live is to run free."

Spareen reported to the khan that his attempt had been unsuccessful. For the next few weeks he listened with guarded eyes to reports from Iskendar Khan's riders that the Turk was nowhere to be found.

When he confided in the golden-eyes mare, she broke her long silence to say, "You did rightly, Spareen."

"I'm glad you condescend to speak with me again," said Spareen. "I was getting lonely."

One night he was sitting outside his yurt, boiling up root of comfrey to make boneset tea, when Iskendar Khan's small, veiled wife came walking through the grass to find him.

"You must come," she said, "for my husband has not slept these last three nights on account of that horse, and I fear it is making him ill."

On hearing this, Spareen reached into his yurt and from his herbal preparations selected valerian root, skullcaps, hops, and chamomile. He carried these in his medicine bag as he followed Iskendar Khan's wife back to her husband's dwelling.

He found Iskendar Khan lying on a gold embroidered floor mat, his eyes bright with fever.

"I must find Old Turk," said the khan.

"But you must understand," said Spareen, "that a horse like that has a need to run free. I have spoken to him myself in the horse language, and I know it's true."

"But such a magnificent stud he would make," said the khan. "I must have him, and I will."

Spareen did not argue with the fire in Iskendar Khan's eye but busied himself making a sedative tea from boiled water. Within an hour the khan's eyelids drooped, and he fell into a deep slumber.

It was a hungry summer for Spareen. Luckily for him, one of the Nogai

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tribe's sheep developed blackleg, and he found some employment that way, but, as usual, they refused to take him on as their permanent leechman. Iskendar Khan got thinner and thinner in spite of an herbal carminative prepared by Spareen, and rich food prepared by the khan's wife.

One day Spareen heard a rumor that Old Turk had been spotted in the Caspian salt flats. That night when he returned from treating blackleg, he discovered that Iskendar's tent and all his riders' yurts had been removed. He knew what that meant.

In a week the khan returned with the Turk as his captive.

"As you can see, I took your advice, Spareen," said the khan. "I did not kill him, merely crippled him a little."

Spareen examined Old Turk in his hastily thrown-up stall of mud and boards. The horse limped painfully on one leg.

"You will never run again," said Spareen. "Even if I were to set you free, you would not get far."

"If you set me free, I will run again, and I will show you how," said the proud old stallion.

Spareen suspected that he knew how. On an ink black night, dark as Spareen's hair, the leechman crept over to the horse pens of Iskendar Khan. It was no trick to witch the one guard on duty. Carefully, Spareen pried the boards out of the mud-and-wattle fence and led the Turk to freedom out on the steppe.

The Turk set off at a jerky trot — no more the free-swinging gait. Spareen followed at a distance on the golden-eyes mare. After a few days' journey they came to the salt flats and marshes of the Caspian. In the distance that deep green sea spanned the horizon. Old Turk followed a path that led up to a precipice overlooking the sea. Backing off, he lumbered into a canter, built up his speed, and leaped off the cliff. Spareen watched from below as the great horse galloped down a causeway of air to a watery death. Spareen sang the horse prayer over the waters, and the golden-eyes mare nickered a sad farewell. It was a long ride home.

A few nights later, as Spareen returned from a night's work, he saw a four-legged ghost dashing through the night over the silver bear-grass. At a whistle from Spareen the ghost horse slowed and came to touch noses with the golden-eyes mare, who flattened her ears and snapped, "I'm not in season, you young nape-nipper. Be gone!"

With a toss of silver mane, the young gray stallion turned and galloped madly away until his hoof tattoo was lost in the sighing of the wind in the tall feather grass.

"Surely the son of his father," said Spareen, and his heart rejoiced that a scion of the old stock again ran free on the steppe.

"But what will you do about Varkura?" said the golden-eyes mare. "Although Iskendar Khan would have

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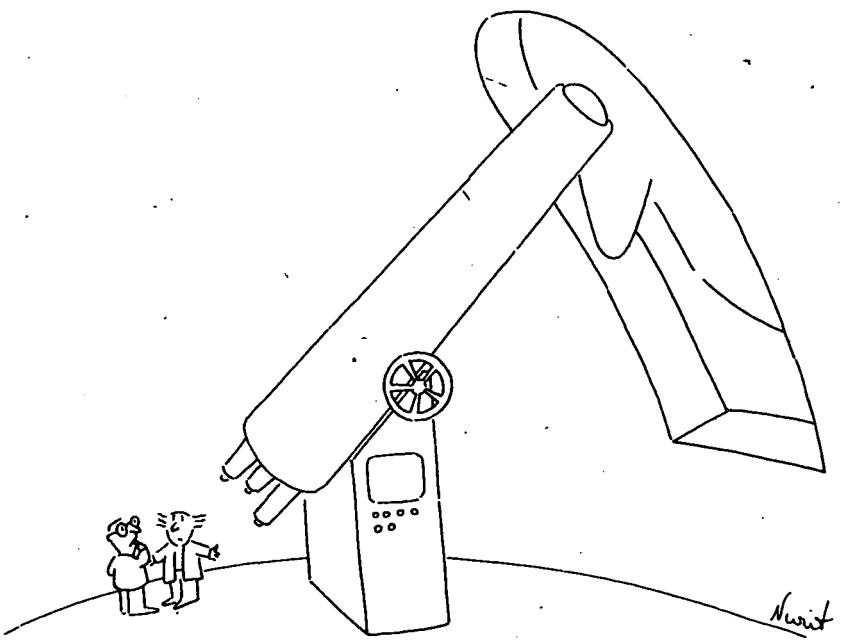
paid you well, I for one am glad you let Old Turk go."

"Varkura...." mused Spareen, smelling the scent of wild ginger in memory. "Never fear, I shall find a way."

"You always say that, but so far you've been unsuccessful."

"Sometimes, Golden-eyes, I think you talk entirely too much," said Spareen.



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George Guthridge is one of the field's best when it comes to the depiction of alien species. Here is a first rate example, a tale set on a Planet called Duala, concerning a field researcher who finally makes contact with the aliens known as the Irrif.

Evolutions

BY

GEORGE GUTHRIDGE

Choking, Quain stumbled through the rain forest and collapsed against a log. His chest was heaving, his bibs of gray flesh fluttered, his lungs were seared with pain. His tail lay straggled, the eye in the tail-pod blinking vacantly. *Caru,* he wailed. *Will I ever see my Maotin again?* With three-fingered hands he gripped the log's silvery bark and fought the pain until it diminished. Then, desperately, he probed the cloak of flesh that hung down his back. Why hadn't the breathing-sac filled this winter! The mantle dangled wrinkled, deflated — useless.

He tried to rise, but hadn't the strength. He lay panting. Drizzle silked his skin. Droplets began pattering upon leaves. His long tail lifted, and his tail-pod eye surveyed the fog. Death-time had seized the forest. Rust-brown spots mottled the trunks. Veils-of-moss had withered to drooping strands. The crimson blooms were pulled inside furry hoods, and the regalworts had drawn beneath the forest floor. *I cannot help you, my lovelies.* Pain again enflamed his lungs. *Must return to my Maotin.* He crawled over the log and went onward, on all fours this time, branches and brambles scratching his face. *I must, I must! Caru!*

"When I first entered the Irrif's homeground," Orlean Fabre wrote in his notebook, "I imagined them accepting me — not as family, certainly, but as friend." He sat hunched over his fold-down desk, squinting against the tent's dull, washed-out light. "But now, exactly one Dualatic year since my arrival, they have yet to acknowledge my presence. Yet the longer I stay, the more intense is my desire to make their study my lifework."

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He reread the passage, then pressed *erase*. Such pomposity and underlying self-elevation! Perhaps Cristaman — Colonel Cristaman — was right; he wasn't capable of objectivity. How she'd love to pounce on those sentences. "Casting off your Messianic complex in favor of martyrdom?" she would ask. "Maybe we should find a researcher more *unattached*." She had unsuccessfully tried to keep him from studying the Irrif on a firsthand basis. He had gone over her head to secure permission. Then she'd insisted that, until enculturation began, even firsthand studies should be done from a distance, using physiometers and surveillance scanners.

Her insistence had been a suggestion, not an order. Ignoring it, he had brought little more than notebooks and holodiscs to the mountainous area where the Irrif resided. His only concessions to Cristaman's equipment obsession were the phone and the dialdiner. Taking time to eat was bothersome enough without his having to cook. His poor caloric intake showed. He was becoming hollow-eyed, and his thick red beard only partially hid his gaunt cheeks. Lately he had taken steps concerning his condition. He avoided the phone screen when it was turned on.

Exhausted, he put down the notebook and sat rubbing his eyes. Things would get better within the next several hours — or worse, depending on one's viewpoint. Duala had two atmospheres, a result of the respective life forms on each side of the planet. Sunside had developed photosynthetic organisms, which fed oxygen into the atmosphere. Darkside's life forms, however depended on the oxidizing of nitrogen, gave off ammonia and hydrogen. The two atmospheres met at Duala's continental girdle of rainforested mountains. Winter in the mountains occurred when Darkside partially turned its face *toward* the sun for a third of Duala's year. The ammonia and hydrogen then pushed into the mountain passes, displacing Sunside's oxygen and nitrogen; the Irrif and the forest entered hibernation. Once green and teeming with life, the mountain pocket became a quiet place. A dead place.

The phone winked on. Fabre slammed the notebook shut.

It was Cristaman, calling from the island colony-base on Sunside. Broad-shouldered, she looked militarily trim in her red uniform with its fur collar and epaulets studded with spacestones. Her hair, silver-sheened, was neatly combed in a sweep along the right side of her face in an attempt to hide the pasty white flesh of her left cheek.

"I've been *waiting* for your call, Captain," she said crisply. She no longer called him Orlean; it had surprised him to realize he no longer thought of her as Miranda. "Your report is three hours overdue." *As usual*, he waited for her to add. She did not continue.

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He forced himself to speak calmly. "The last of the Irrif should enter hibernation within hours. Only a couple of individuals are still wandering around inside their cave, fattening themselves from their flower bins."

"Fine. Sounds like an excellent time to shut down operations. I've memoed Command, suggesting you be returned to normal duties here at the base."

Cold rage raced along his spine. "Now just a minute! I was granted seven standard *months* for research — not seven weeks!" After that he would request another research cycle. And another. Return to the base, and sooner or later Command would again have him sticking enculturation electrodes in the brains of what it called Intelligent Alien Species. In school he'd been taught that xenologists studied *natives*. Prior to his research leave, his job consisted of using the electrodes to help natives study *humans*, or at least human culture. That understanding, Command insisted, was necessary if colonization were to succeed on inhabited planets, even partially inhabited ones such as Duala. Galactic law stated that native societal processes could not be interfered with. Command argued that the electrodes did not interfere — merely taught. Someone had forgotten to tell Command that interference and teaching were two faces of the same concept.

"You were granted a research cycle barring emergency," Cristaman said. "Command has given the go-ahead to move beyond the islands and establish a beachhead along the equatorial continent."

Then up into the mountains, to the Irrif. "I suppose you had a hand in that."

"Let's say I was instrumental."

He hated her overbearing calm, her impenetrable facade. Strange how her mouth, once soft and yielding and capable of such pleasure, had hardened to something useful only for speaking and eating. It frightened him, that change. It had been so sudden, after her facial operation and subsequent tissue rejection; so overpowering. She had shuttled him out of her life as if he had been tied in a sack and left outside a door for pickup and disposal. The quickness, the demeaning abruptness, disturbed him more than anything else. "Now Command can swallow up another native culture," he said. "I bet you phoned General Kyel the instant I left Sunside. I'm amazed you aren't giving me a pep talk on manifest destiny."

Her eyes narrowed with anger. "I phoned, Captain, rather than just cutting orders, out of respect for a fellow officer. But another remark like that, and I'll have you back here facing a court martial. No one's going to be 'swallowed up.' You know as well as I that every sentient species humanity's come in contact with has benefited from enculturation. Just as humans would, if a technologically advanced race had landed on Earth." She leaned

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forward, shadows darkening the right side of her face, the half not damaged in the lab explosion. "And don't think for one moment your presence among the Irrif influenced my decision." She glanced around, as though to see if anyone in the office were watching. "Don't give yourself that much credit."

Military courtesy prescribed that the ranking officer sign off first.

Fabre snapped off the set.

Quain staggered into the clearing. Behind him, the multihued mountains shimmered in the changing air. To the left the strangething's home, the hut-that-trembles, swayed in the wind. Beyond wavered the cave entrances, his home. *Maotin.* He tried walking — suddenly his legs buckled and he found himself on his knees. He crawled, gripping dirt, galegrass, thistle. *So close, my Maotin.* Reaching out, he toppled sideways. *So close. Caru.*

Dry grass brushed against him. His tail slinked over his shoulder and crawled among the weeds. Beneath a thistle cowered a shrunken regalwort. Several proboscises uncoiled from around the eye, plucked the plant and brought it back. His mouth opened, but he couldn't bring himself to eat. He lay staring toward the caves.

Maotin; sister, lover, bearer. In sleep should we seven be touching, three brothers on each side of you on the rod, willing your eggs to stir. In after-winter shall there be new voices for the songs. Will those youngling have no part of Quain — complete but bereft? Part of their fatherhood denied? So close, my Maotin; I cry for them. I cry for us. Caru. I wail in the wind.

Arms folded. Fabre stood by the tent door, careful not to disturb the air filter flow. He sighed. So Cristaman was having him reeled in; he had run long enough.

The meadow sloped down to the rain forest, which glittered with the colors of seasonal change: amber, rust-browns, silver. Stringy cumulostratus, reddened by the sun's brightness, veiled the sky. *Which will you hate to lose the most — this place, or its people?* Stooping before the wash kit, he inserted his contacts against the ammonia-hydrogen, adjusted his larynx to close his throat and activate the subsystem breather, and decided the phone would look best facing the wall. He turned it around before leaving.

Rows of narrow high-arched cave entrances penetrated the chalky cliffside behind the tent. They reminded him of black tombstones. He walked quietly, as though to crack a twig would wake the sleeping Irrif within those caves. Grass shushed against his jumpsuit.

Forgot the damn notebook. He stopped, stood looking at the caves. Then he realized his error, and he suddenly felt drained. How foolish he'd been! In his reports he'd emphasized the Irrif's probable genetic and immu-

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nizational frailty, hoping they'd be left alone — not forcibly enculterated.

The enculteration procedure was designed to reduce cultural shock, through the subliminal implantation of human concepts. And Cristaman was right: given human parameters, all enculturated species had benefited from the process — as a species ... and given human parameters. But individuals suffered. The Irrif were the third sentient species discovered in the fourteen-planet system. The two other species had already undergone enculturation. Some of the tree-skimming Nagalee, exposed to the human concept of gravity, had lost their ability to fly. Several M'bylot had signed as laborers with their planet's human colony, suddenly believing in their own strength rather than in the boulders they worshipped; other M'bylot just sat and stared at the ground.

Fabre now suspected how Cristaman would use the information he'd supplied. Rather than protecting the Irrif, his information would help imprison them. Enculturation would begin while the Irrif hibernated; if not this winter, then the next. Cristaman would order them shuttled en masse to the Sunside islands, where the electrodes could more easily be implanted.

Screw the notebook.

His pace quickened.

Then he saw the grayish lump in the grass. An Irrif — dead perhaps? What was it doing out here in the meadow! With the onset of winter, the Irrif left the clearings and stayed deep with their caves, where the ammonia-hydrogen levels were lower.

Fabre touched the shoulder hesitantly. *A year, and you've never been this close to an Irrif before; at least never touched one.* The flesh felt slick. Fabre was trembling. Warmth pulsed within the Irrif, but it did not move. He turned the Irrif over and braced its back with a rock, fearing that to roll the Irrif over completely might damage the breathing-sac.

A male or unfertilized female: the tubular flesh that aproned from the throat to the excretory valve had not been stretched. The neck bibs, normally pouchy with masticated food this time of year, hung shriveled. Why, when the flower bins bulked in every corner of the caves? And why hadn't the breathing-sac filled? Its tissues should have swelled with the oxygen the lungs would use when winter triggered the closing of the sleeper's throat.

The lace mouth-flaps rippled. Sputtery gurgles issued. The eyes, tall and black, opened vertically, mirroring Fabre as the Irrif fought for breath. Fabre drew back. What to do! Stick a finger in the mouth and clear the air passage? But it was winter! He *mustn't* open the airway!

Squeeze the breathing-sac. He applied pressure. The flesh, spongy, remained flat and wrinkled when he released it. His hands left whitish marks in the grayness.

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The gurgling ceased. The chest expanded. The Irrif calmly closed its eyes. Fabre relaxed.

Easy now. He smiled. *I'll get you to your cave.* He slid his arms under the Irrif.

The eyes sprung open again, bulging, the choking recurring. The Irrif doubled over, dwarfish legs stiffening. The back jerked, and the Irrif clutched dirt, Fabre's ankle, then a cry of pain sounded in the throat and the three fingers curled up. Fabre lurched back. *My doing?* In horror he watched the neck tauten. Veins stood out in the scalp. Then the Irrif went limp, rolled onto its belly. The body spasmed, and was still.

Fabre squeezed the breathing-sac so hard his hand shook. Breathe, damn you! Breathe! No good. He had already forced out what little air had been in the tissues. Turning the head, Fabre eased open the vertical mouth-slit, probed the sticky flaps with his finger.

The choking became deeper, almost a dry heaving. Brown spittle curled down the chin. Fabre swallowed thickly. His heart thudding, he lifted the Irrif by the knees, upside-down, the splayed, sandpapery feet scraping his face. *The Irrif hang by their knees while they sleep. Perhaps positioning affects the oxygen engorgement of the breathing-sac.*

The choking grew raspier.

Suddenly Fabre found himself running, the Irrif in a fireman's carry across his shoulders. Though only a meter and a half tall, the Irrif was surprisingly heavy; Fabre was out of breath when he reached the tent.

He flopped the Irrif onto the cot and, readjusting his larynx so he was breathing through his left, natural lung, spun the phone and punched Cristaman's number. Snow. Then he heard her buzz the phone on, and the screen focused. She was standing, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "If you're calling to make arrangements for your return trip," she said, "I'll be happy to speak with you. But not if you've phoned to request an extension for staying in the mountains. Not after your last call."

"Something's come up."

"A problem?" She sipped, facing him, her one eyebrow raised. "Surely *you* don't have a problem!"

Why, he asked himself, did he feel so small talking to her since the operation, so boyish, so shamed? It was almost as if *he* had been responsible for the explosion and her later transfer from the lab to the desk job. She'd caused the accident; and after the tissue rejection, it was General Kyel who had turned down her request to be shipped home for a new operation. Her injury, Command said, though disfiguring, was not serious enough to keep her from performing her new job; therefore not serious enough for a medivac. Her new job. What a joke. Screw up so badly you almost kill yourself, and Command kicks you up-

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stairs to head up the colonization of an entire planet. Typical.

Gripping the sides of the phone to steady his anger, he told her about the Irrif. "He appears to be breathing easier, now that he's out of the winter air," he added, suddenly amused that he'd begun thinking of the Irrif as a male. "Apparantly the throat isn't closed; perhaps that's why the sac didn't fill. Engorge the sac artificially, and he might have a chance. Except...." His voice trailed off.

"Except that would require throat surgery. Minimal surgery, but surgery nonetheless. Correct?"

Fabre was silent.

"Well?"

"Yes. Surgery."

She set the cup down. "Any disturbance of native societal processes prior to enculteration shall be deemed a willful violation of Command prescription." Cristaman rattled off the general order. "We wouldn't want you denouncing enculteration, then being forced to play savior." She lifted her index finger as if scolding a child. "The Irrif goes back where you found it."

"Cristaman—!"

"That's an order."

He slammed down the video button with his fist. The screen blackened. "I'll go around you."

"If you wish."

Consciousness slowly returned, greens and golds dancing in Quain's mind. His chest felt afire. His hearts pounded. The strangething loomed beside him, its thoughts throbbing. Quain peered past, toward the door. Should he run? He struggled against his fear. *Winter brings the fastness of sleep,* the Knowledge told; *a time of knowing one's self and one another.* Perhaps he'd been destined for a new kind of knowing, here in the strangething's hut.

He gripped the cloth of the platform on which he lay. The platform rocked. The strangething shifted, all ugliness and musk. Quain lay still. He did not greatly fear the creature. But there were other such creatures; he'd seen them down at the beach, beyond the forest. Could they be trusted? *Meet with the sea, you hummed, Maotin; for three winters has your sleep been ragged. Bathe the sac in the sea; perhaps that will help it fill. So Quain journeyed. And found? A black beach aswarm with strangethings! Vessels afloat upon the waters and air. Forgive Quain for not bringing this news, my sister. His sac is his betrayer.*

Each breath came slowly, and with pain.

It took friends and time to communicate with Command.

Last year's go-round with Cristaman concerning his research request had strengthened Fabre's prestige among certain sectors. So it wasn't difficult to persuade the chubby, squinty-eyed lieutenant in charge of commo to

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put the relay through. Step One.

Step Two: Command was headquartered on Tendril, the system's fourth planet, 30 AUs away. The resulting time lag was negligible, however, compared to Step Three — General Kyel's habit of bringing decisions to a slow boil.

Fabre waited. He had not been, originally, officer material; or so he'd been told upon his enlistment. His advancement up the ranks and his finally being approved to attend a civilian university had therefore been agonizingly difficult. Perform surgery on the Irrif without General Kyel's okay, and Cristaman wouldn't simply yank him off the research cycle and put him back sticking electrodes in Intelligent Alien Species. She'd have his commission.

So he waited. He arranged his medical supplies on a towel, invented and won a dozen arguments with Cristaman, stared at the Irrif's barely parted eyes until the Irrif, blinking, would look at him and Fabre would glance away.

At last the call came.

Kyel was thin and fever-decimated, with jowly, loose-fleshed cheeks and careem jewels pinwheeling in his earlobes. Bare-chested except for a necklace of orange feathers, he had shaved his white chest hair in a series of chevrons. "You certainly are a person with initiative, Captain Fabre," he said, smiling and shaking his head slightly. "Seems like only last week I was granting you permission, against Colonel Cristaman's wishes, to study these...." He gestured to someone offscreen, and was handed a folder, which he opened and glanced at. "...these *Irrif* firsthand." He pronounced the name *ear*-if rather than the usual ear-*reef*. "I felt it was good PR. Henri Fabre and his insects; Orlean Fabre and the Irrif."

It was a constant comparison, and Fabre had learned to live with it. Kyel had made excellent publicity use of Fabre's being directly descended from the nineteenth century entomologist who urged that insects be studied through direct observation in natural habitats. How Command justified research, Fabre figured, was Command's business.

"And perhaps," Kyel went on, "Colonel Cristaman was a bit hasty in telling you to leave the alien out in the winter air, where it would certainly die an unpleasant death." The general's eyes became loving; his smile seemed to reach out. "Still, there are other considerations. A colony-push is under way; you've probably been down to the coast to greet the new arrivals."

Damn you, Cristaman, why'd you lie! You said the push was due to start, not that it already had! Were you afraid to tell me the truth? Did you think I'd try to sabotage your little project?

"So it would be unwise if you interfered with the alien's physical problems; the timing would be very, very bad," Kyel said. "Just make its final moments as comfortable as possible.

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I'll request a team to airlift the body. Perhaps some good can result from this unfortunate situation."

"He needs surgery, not dissection!"

There was a time lag.

Then: "Out of the question, Captain."

Once we loved during waking, Maotin. My tongue caressed your scalp and sac. You closed your eyes and hummed a song of the sea. Sensed you the swarming then? Is that why you sent Quain — as lookout? Or to rid yourself of his breathing! Our father Revel, one of his fathers before him, suffered the same weakness. Early came our father's death. How the cave echoed with your wailing when I buried him beneath the crimsonflower bin. For that did you send me, Maotin? Because my pain was too great a weight for the sleep-rod?

The gurgling had lessened, though the Irrif still shook with each gasp. Fabre stood with scalpel in hand, his palms damp.

Damn you, Miranda Cristaman.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and unzipped the jumpsuit, then picked up the can of anesthetic he'd taken from the first-aid kit, and sprayed his chest. The mist made him shiver. He looked down to see a trickle slide down his belly, numbing as it went. Then, scalpel in hand, he sliced quickly along the J-shaped scar beneath his right nipple, before he could change his mind about using his artificial lung to help him operate on the Irrif. He flinched, though felt the cut only as a dull scraping. Blood rimmed the wound, then meandered downward as if following the earlier trail of anesthetic.

He licked his lips. Then, pulling back the skin flap he'd cut, he eased a digitator between his ribs; with the wirelike instrument he probed for the access-hole in the left side of the lung. Usually the hole was used for maintenance. Early explorers had discovered it also enabled the subsystem breather to double as resuscitator.

The digitator slipped inside an opening. There! His shoulders slumped with relief, and he exhaled sharply. Then, shutting his eyes against the pain, he maneuvered the resuscitator tube down the digitator wire and into the hole. The tubing hung from his chest in a coil. Like a proboscis, he thought, looking at the long lashlike filaments surrounding the Irrif's tailpod eye. He attached a needle to the resuscitator tube's opposite end. Through exploratory surgery, he'd have to figure out why the Irrif's throat wasn't closing properly, then use the subsystem breather to inflate the breathing-sac — *if* he could get the Irrif to hold still for the operation. Wondrously simple. Fabre toweled sweat from his forehead.

The Irrif, staring toward the door, moved his arm in weak protest as Fabre tilted the head back. Then the

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native lay still, as though waiting for Fabre to proceed. But how? Use a local and risk scaring the Irrif to death when he began cutting the throat or when he slid the resuscitator-coil needle into the breathing-sac? Or put the Irrif under and risk possibly killing him from a chemical reaction. So much he didn't know! He suddenly realized his knowledge of the Irrif was as rudimentary as the medical training he'd received at the university. He stood with his finger on the anesthetic-can nozzle. *A year of in-field study, and I've no more understanding of them than ... than I have of Miranda Cristaman.*

He'd put the Irrif under.

He sprayed a sterile pad with anesthetic, then placed the anesthetic can beside the phone and moved behind the Irrif. The Irrif blinked and looked up. The mouth opened to a diamond shape, then abruptly shut. Fabre took hold of the shoulder. The Irrif shuddered and began softly whistling. The eyes closed and opened several times. "Easy now," Fabre whispered. "Steady."

He had the anesthetic pad just above the mouth when the Irrif gripped his wrist.

"Damn you, let go!" Fabre tried to pull away. He lurched for the anesthetic can — couldn't reach it. The Irrif clung on. Rolling backward, the Irrif brought his legs up and grasped Fabre's elbow with his feet.

"Don't you understand I'm trying to help you?"

The Irrif's grip tightened. Fabre tried to pry back one of the Irrif's fingers; the Irrif seemed to have almost effortless strength. For a moment human and Irrif remained locked, the anesthetic beginning to claw at Fabre's brain. Desperately he fought to bring the anesthetic-laden pad down over the Irrif's mouth. The tail-pod eye lifted, looking down on the scene like a gooseneck lamp.

The Irrif suddenly released his hold. The tail lowered. He gazed darkly at Fabre. Then, cocking his head, he raised his face toward the anesthetic-laden cloth. It was an act of submission, or perhaps acknowledgement that the human meant him no ill will.

Fabre suddenly realized Cristaman's plan.

"Oh my god." Pitching the pad onto the floor, he flung himself toward the phone and punched Cristaman's number.

"Something else wrong, Captain?" Cristaman asked, looking up from paper work. "I thought you'd taken that matter with the Irrif over my head."

"You know very well what's wrong! Kyel told me about the colony push."

"So?"

"Your idea isn't going to work, *Colonel.* You knew Kyel would tell me the push had already started. After he got my message he would have communicated with you before returning my call. You must have *wanted* me

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to know you'd lied."

"Oh?" she asked sarcastically. "And why would I do that?"

"To protect your push, maybe? I might lack authority to stop the project, but if I got my reports on the Irrif into the right hands, I could sure slow things down. Unless you made me angry enough to disobey orders by operating on the Irrif. Then you could court-martial and discredit me, and there'd be no one to keep you from terraforming the entire planet if you wanted to."

Cristaman clapped her hands. "You *are* to be commended. And if what you say is indeed true? Just what are you going to do about it? Let your patient die? You haven't the balls, Captain."

"Perhaps not." He was going to enjoy this: he made an effort to speak distinctly. "But maybe no surgery will be necessary. The Irrif seems to be responding to the tent's atmosphere. I'll keep him here — after all, Kyel *ordered* me to make the Irrif as comfortable as possible — and when summer comes and the oxygen returns the Irrif can go back to his people. Have Kyel change his order and take this tent away, and you'll kill the Irrif, Cristaman. Then heads will roll. Maybe I wouldn't be able to prove that your ordering me back to the base constituted interference with native societal processes prior to enculturation — but I sure would raise one hell of a stink trying. So for the time being the Irrif's staying right here on my cot." Fabre spun the phone so she could see.

He felt the blood leave his face.

The Irrif was gone.

Once you touched the strangething's mind, Maotin. The creature was benign, you hummed: its mind a moiling of pinks and greens. And in the hut-that-trembles the strangething eased Quain's agony. Yet the strangething is not civilized; it does not game. Happy perhaps for Quain's comfort, it presented a gift, a white pad-thing laden with smell. Quain played hug-and-grip. The strangething tossed the gift aside.

Ahead the cliffside slanted. The entrances awaited. Pain had again seized his lungs and face-eyes. His right side felt paralyzed; he dragged his leg as, clutching his throat, he slogged through the grass.

Before I left for the sea, Maotin, before I witnessed the swarm of strangethings, before I realized my breathing-sac would not fill this winter, I begged that you love me alone, that you forsake our brothers and share the sleep-rod only with Quain. You mulled upon the request, as the Knowledge requires. Then you told me. It frightened me, the truth. Quain's breathing, you hummed, so guttural and raspy, repulsed you. If anyone were shunted from the sleep-rod it would be Quain.

I come to you now, Maotin, weaker, wiser. Hum for me. Let me be as my brothers. Let me share your eggs.

* * *

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It wasn't possible.

The ammonia-hydrogen count was 57.72 percent, a higher reading than any he'd taken the previous winter. The Irrif, with his collapsed breathing-sac, should have died a dozen meters outside the tent. Unless the throat had closed of its own accord, and the sac had mysteriously filled. No, he thought. The sac was empty. *Empty.*

Wearing a headband-light, Fabre hurried toward the caves. Dust and dry leaves spun in the wind. The stitches in his chest hurt; the anesthetic was wearing off. But Cristaman's laughter was the greater pain. How to deal with her! Every tack he tried since she'd been injured in the lab explosion failed. "The ultimate loss of face," she'd called the operation. He'd been with her in the operating room; or rather, the storage bubble the med techs on Sunside called an operating room. "Let me die," she had whispered from the table, the left side of her face a mass of bone splinters and raw flesh. It was the same hoarse, husky tones in which she had sometimes told him, "Love me, Orlean. Hold me forever." Exactly the same tone.

He reached the cliff base, scrambled up the talus and, after glancing toward the security of the tent, entered the cool dimness. His headband-light glowed. Head bowed, he passed down a corridor bearded with stalactites, took another reading: 52.23. Still not low enough for the Irrif to breathe. Could the injured Irrif still be in the field, and he'd overlooked him? Impossible. The tracks had been too evident.

He entered the first chamber. The ceiling was lost in darkness. The dripping of water echoed. A shallow pond mirrored stalagmites and pebbly domes. Tall baskets woven of green leaves stood at the water's edge. And set into the rock niches were polished sleep-rods, burdened with Irrif. They hung by their knees, their engorged bibs open, white and gray flesh alternating accordionlike. Their manes caped downward, breathing-sacs dangling like enormous testicles. He had counted four thousand individuals the winter before, in three chambers. No Irrif had been discovered elsewhere on the planet. The enculturation roundup would be laughingly easy. Cristaman not only would oversee the project, she'd probably want to implant the electrodes personally. The effects of the enculturation process upon the hibernating Irrif would interest her greatly; the study of sleep had been her forte, once. She had been doing deep-space-suspension experiments when the lab accident occurred.

The nearest sleep-rod contained two males on each side of a female, fingers interlocked. The tails lifted, craning, the pod-eyes scrutinizing him. Fabre's heart thudded as he approached.

Was his Irrif here, sleeping the winter's sleep? He would have to examine each Irrif until he found the shriveled sac and bibs. During summer, when

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the Irrif cavorted on the meadow or darted among the rain forest foliage, they were distinguishable by height and actions. Now, eyes pinched shut and mouths pursed, they looked identical.

As identical as insects. A feeling of sick apprehension seized Fabre. No wonder Kyel had approved his initial research request and Cristaman had offically withdrawn her opposition! Kyel's PR concerning the name Fabre was not only designed to focus attention on the project ... it was meant to reduce the Irrif's stature in the public eye.

Suddenly feeling defeated, he stood staring vacantly at the sleepers. His lips tightened. All this time he'd been working against enculturation — and in reality had been working for it.

Then he could hear the sleepers' humming. Low and sibilant, it drifted through the cave like a soft snoring uninterrupted by inhalation. It was similar to the whistling of the Irrif in the tent, except quieter, as if cushioned by sleep and safety. Fabre felt his anger reduced. The previous winter the humming had seemed a shapeless drone. Now it lifted, wavered, lilted. Was that a half note? That a leitmotiv? He almost feared to listen closely. Conscious perception might reveal the humming as just the sound of sleep, nothing more, without substance or form.

He turned toward the rod, wary even of looking at the Irrif though he was near enough to touch them, feeling the humming shift and shiver. Subtle, so subtle were the changes! He shut his eyes. The humming filled him, and he let his body go slack. His shoulders sagged. His anger stilled. He glided with the humming, his rage and resistance melting into a weave of greens, golds, lilacs, and ambers that possessed him.

He envisioned himself on the meadow, laughing and throwing a stick to another Irrif, aware that winter would be coming as it always did and he must make the most of summer, a warm pressure building in his breathing-sac.

He knew crimsonpetals, rustling leaves, the taste of roots fat with milk, a white wind, and he listened to the song of growing and sensed the mingling of odor and air, which was yet another song, thought muted.

Then winter slid through the mountain passes and he entered a nonplace devoid of images and sound, in a cave and empty as a cave but not a cave, a space between heartbeats and suffused with oneness, where the mind, drifting among egg clusters, shuddered pleasantly in endless images of love. *I belong,* he felt himself say, imagining the words pass physically through his lips, like a bubble a child blows. *Fabre belongs.*

His eyes opened. Beyond the light of his headband the hollow of the cave called. The Irrif female loomed before him, her face pinched and pursed. He reached out, the humming enwrapping

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him, his pulse coursing in his ears. Sweat runneled his temples.

The female's pod-eye backed away. The tail of the males serpentined forward. Pod-eyes glared, poised like cobras. Proboscises uncurled and recoiled. He was on his knees, hands and arms outstretched, whimpering. Were the knowing, the communion, the ease and images to end so quickly?

The tails vined around his arms, and squeezed. He looked at the pod-eyes, then at his hands, and sat down again. That he was not an Irrif, that he had never been an Irrif, surprised him. And the humming had changed — seemed more distant, as though guarded. It was not for mere humankind, he realized; too ancient and sacred to be intruded upon for personal pleasure. Too purposeful to be defeated. A culture strong enough to develop on a world of two atmospheres might possibly survive in a world of two peoples. He smiled. It was a sad smile.

There was another sound. Neither humming nor the dripping of water nor the surging of blood in his ears.

Breathing.

Not his own, of course; when the artificial lung was activated, normal breathing ceased. The sound, faulty and punctuated by sputtering, came from one of the huge flower baskets.

He tried looking into the basket, but it was too tightly woven and the top was too high. Finally he boosted himself onto one end of the sleep-rod above the basket and, holding onto a stalagmite, cast the headband light downward.

The Irrif lay on his back amid dried flowers. His legs were pulled up, his feet grasping a lavender blossom. He raised his head, poked the flower into his mouth, then, probing the mouth with a nailless finger, drew out the stem and tossed it aside. He picked up another blossom.

My god. The Irrif's still breathing. He must have adapted to breathing ammonia-hydrogen. A mutant. Fabre dropped into the bin and landed astraddle the Irrif, flowers catapulting around him. The Irrif eyed him steadily. The cheeks worked at the blossom. The mouth flaps trilled. Then the tail poked up from the flowers and, the proboscises clutching a crimson-petaled blossom, moved toward Fabre. He accepted the flower, slid his arms around the Irrif's shoulders and helped him to his feet. Human and Irrif leaned against the basket, arms over the edge, gazing at the conclave of sleepers. *He's different from them. Just as Cristaman is different from the woman she used to be. Not defeatable; though perhaps approachable, capable of being understood in new ways. But how!*

Death-time and sleep-time have come to the mountains, Maotin, yet Quain knows you not. For you and for himself did he journey back from the sea, though his sac was shriveled and his pain great; for you and for himself shall he leave the cave. You refused to

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hum for Quain as you slept, the knowledge of your eggs cold to Quain now that he no longer needs a sac against the winter wind. So Quain leaves from the cave. From his home. The hut-that-trembles breathes warm; comfort there, and less pain. When the poison winds forget the forest and the mountains again find their green — perhaps then shall Quain return. Perhaps the strangething shall return, too. For surely by then will Quain have touched the strangething's mind, and taught it how to game.

They emerged from the cave and into reality.

The winds assailed them, whipping Fabre's hair. The galegrass was bent nearly to the ground. The red sun was a dull burnish behind the swirling clouds. The ammonia-hydrogen count had climbed past 80. Fabre felt his optimism dissolve. It was as if he'd awakened from a night bedecked with devils, and the problem he had wrestled with and thought he'd solved was still alive and snarling. He could save this one Irrif; and the culture might save itself, in the long run. But what of those sleepers down there, so calm and warm? Could they individually resist Cristaman's electrodes and subliminal seduction?

The Irrif, apparently weakened by the denser atmosphere, suddenly went limp in Fabre's arms. Fabre lifted him. He'd have to get the Irrif to the tent, then later use the air filter system to acclimate this Irrif slowly to whatever ammonia-hydrogen level existed outside. He moved across the field. The Irrif's head nuzzled his jumpsuit. The trilling began again. Almost a purring. It thrummed within Fabre's chest.

And then he knew how to reach Miranda Cristaman.

Still cradling the Irrif, he began to run. He would put the Irrif to bed, phone the base, tell Cristaman that, among the hibernating Irrif, he's made a discovery concerning sleep-suspension she should see — personally. Hear personally. Experience.

A humming.

Perhaps he could get her to feel that sense of belonging he had known when he'd listened. That sense of group, and love, and strength. Then she, too, would want to protect the Irrif, not enculterate them. Except there would be a difference between him and her. He could protect them only with his heart.

As head of the Sunside base and nominal head of all colonization projects on Duala, she could protect them officially.

Technology was not the only method of enculturation. He'd match the humming against the electrodes any day.

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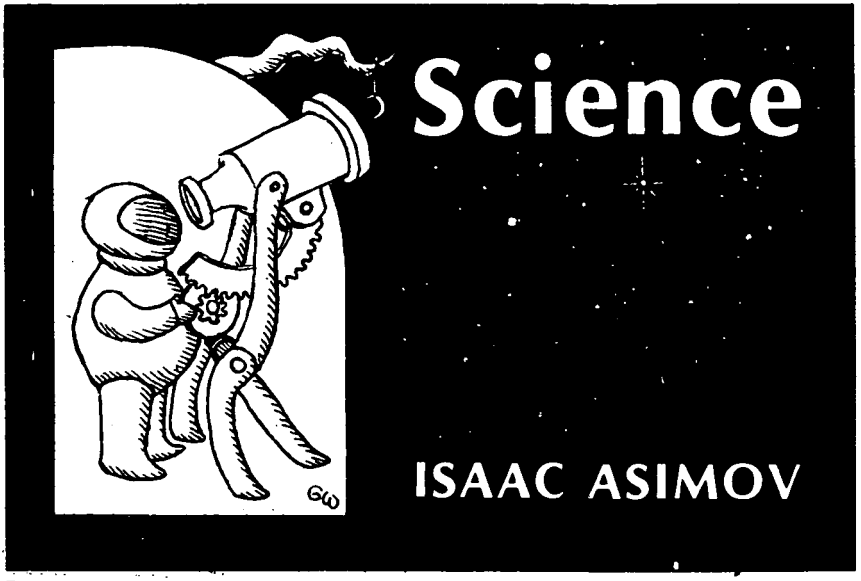

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

WHAT TRUCK?

I am not a very visual person. What's more, I have a very lively inner life so that things are jumping about inside my cranium all the time and that distracts me. Other people are therefore astonished at the things I don't see. People change their hairstyles and I don't notice. New furniture comes into the house and I sit on it without comment.

Once, however, I seem to have broken the record in that respect. I was walking up Lexington Avenue, speaking animatedly (as is my wont) to someone who was walking with me. I walked across a roadway, still talking; my companion crossing with me with what seemed to be a certain reluctance.

On the other side, my companion said, "That truck missed us by one inch."

And I said, in all innocence, "What truck?"

So I got a rather long dull lecture, which didn't reform me, but which got me to thinking about the ease with which one can fail to see trucks. For instance—

Some time ago, a reader sent me a copy of the October, 1903 issue of

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Munsey's Magazine, and I looked through it with considerable interest. The enormous advertising section was like a window into another world. The item of particular fascination, however, which the reader had called to my attention, was an article entitled "Can Men Visit the Moon?" by Ernest Green Dodge, A.M.

It was the kind of article I myself might have written eighty years ago.

As it happens, I have often had occasion to wonder whether my own attempts to write about technology of the future might seem less than inspired in the brilliant light of hindsight. I have usually felt, rather woefully, that they would; that it would turn out that there would be trucks I didn't see, or trucks that I saw that weren't really there.

I can't expect to live eighty years and check on myself, but what if I look at remarks I might have made eighty years ago and see how they would sound in the light of what we now know.

Mr. Dodge's article is the perfect way of doing this, for he was clearly a rational man with a good knowledge of science and with a strong, but disciplined imagination. In short, he was as I like to imagine that I am.

In some places, he hits the target right in the bulls-eye.

Concerning a trip to the Moon, he says: "...it is not, like perpetual motion or squaring the circle, a logical impossibility. The worst that can be said is that it now looks as difficult to us as the crossing of the great Atlantic must once have appeared to the naked savage upon its shore, with no craft but a fallen tree and no paddle but his empty hands. The impossibility of the savage became the triumph of Columbus, and the day dream of the nineteenth century may become the achievement even of the twentieth."

Exactly! Human beings were standing on the Moon only 66 years after Dodge's article had appeared.

Dodge goes on to list the difficulties of space travel, which, he points out, arise primarily out of the fact that "space is indeed empty, in a sense which no man-made vacuum can approach. ...a portion of outer space the size of the earth contains absolutely nothing, so far as we know, but a few flying grains of meteoric stone, weighing perhaps ten or fifteen pounds in all."

Dodge is a careful man. Although the statement seemed irrefutable in 1903, he inserts that cautious phrase "so far as we know" and was right to do so.

In 1903, subatomic particles were just becoming known. Electrons and radioactive radiations had been discovered less than a decade before. These were only Earthbound phenomena, however, and cosmic rays were not discovered until 1911. Dodge could not, therefore, have known that space

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was filled with energetic, electrically charged particles of insignificant mass, but considerable importance.

On the basis of what he did know in 1903, Dodge lists four difficulties that could arise in traveling from Earth to Moon through the vacuum of outer space.

The first is, of course, that there is nothing to breathe. He dismisses that, quite correctly, by pointing out that a spaceship would be airtight and would carry its own internal atmosphere, just as it would bring along supplies of food and drink. Breathing is therefore no problem.

The second difficulty is that of "the terrible cold" of outer space. This Dodge takes more seriously.

It is, however, a problem that tends to be overestimated. To be sure, any piece of matter that is in deep space and far from any source of radiation would reach an equilibrium temperature of about 3 degrees absolute, so that this can be viewed as "the temperature of space." Anything traveling from the Earth to the Moon is, however, not far from a source of radiation. It is in the vicinity of the Sun, just as much as the Earth and Moon are, and is bathed in solar radiation all the way.

What's more, the vacuum of space is an excellent heat insulator. This was well known in 1903, for James Dewar had invented the equivalent of the thermos bottle eleven years before the article was written. There is sure to be internal heat within the spaceship, if only the body heat of the astronauts themselves, and this will be lost very slowly by way of radiation through vacuum. (This is the only way of losing heat in space.)

Dodge thinks that the ships would have to be guarded against heat loss by "having the walls ... heavily padded." He also suggests a heat supply in the form of "large parabolic mirrors outside [which] would throw concentrated beams of sunlight through the window."

This is a sizable overestimate since nothing of the sort is necessary. There is insulation that must be placed on the outside of the ships, but that is for the purpose of avoiding the *gain* of too much heat during passage through the atmosphere. The *loss* of heat is of no concern to anyone.

The third difficulty arises from the fact that the ship will be in free fall during most or all the passage from the Earth to the Moon so that the astronauts will experience no gravitational pull. This, Dodge very reasonably shrugs off, pointing out that "dishes could be fastened to the table, and people could leap and float, even if they could not walk."

He does not speculate on possible deleterious physiological changes arising from exposure to zero gravity, and this might be considered short-

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sighted. Still, this has turned out not to be a short-range problem. In recent years, people have remained under zero gravity conditions continously for more than half a year and have apparently shown no permanent ill effects.

The fourth and last danger that Dodge considers is that of the possibility of meteoric collisions but (despite the fact that science fiction writers continued to view that as a major danger for half a century longer) Dodge dismisses this, too, as statistically insignificant. He was right to do so.

He does not mention the fifth danger, that of the cosmic rays and other electrically charged particles, something he simply could not have known about in 1903. There were some misgivings about this after the discovery of the radiation belts in 1958 but, as it turns out, they did not materially interfere with humanity's reach to the Moon.

Dodge thus decided that there were no dangers in space that would prevent human beings from reaching the Moon, and he was right. If anything, he had overestimated the danger of the supposed cold of space.

The next question was exactly how to go about actually traversing the distance from Earth to Moon. In this connection, he mentions five possible "plans." (One gets the impression, though Dodge does not actually say so, that these five plans are the only ones that are conceivable.)

The simplest is "the Tower Plan." This would involve the construction of an object tall enough to reach the Moon, something like the scheme of the builders of the Biblical tower of Babel. Dodge mentions the Eiffel Tower, which had been built 14 years before, and which, at a height of 984 feet, was the tallest structure in the world at the time the article was written (and for 27 years longer).

He says: "the combined wealth of all nations might construct an edifice of solid steel eight or ten miles in height, but not much more, for the simple reason that the lower parts could not be made strong enough to bear the weight that must rest upon them." To reach the Moon, there would have to be "a building material about five hundred times tougher than armor-plate, and such may never be discovered." (Note the "may." Dodge is a careful man.)

There are many other deficiencies to the plan that Dodge does not mention. The Moon, having an elliptical orbit at an angle to Earth's equatorial plane, would approach the top of the tower only once in long while, and when it did so, the Lunar gravity would produce a huge strain on it. Air would remain only at the bottom of the tower, thanks to the pull of Earth's gravity and there would still be the problem of traversing the 300,000 kilometers or so to the Moon's perigee distance after the tower has been

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built (let alone, traversing it in the process of building the tower). Scratch the "Tower Plan."

Dodge doesn't mention the variant possibility of a "skyhook," a long vertical structure in such a position between Earth and Moon that the combined gravitional pull holds it in place, and that can be used as a help in negotiating the Earth-Moon passage. Personally, I don't think that's anywhere near practical, either.

Dodge's second scheme is "the Projectile Plan." This involves shooting a ship out of a giant cannon and having it emerge with speed enough to reach the Moon (if correctly aimed). This is the method used by Jules Verne in *From the Earth to the Moon*, published thirty-eight years before, in 1865.

Dodge points out that to reach the Moon, the projectile must leave the muzzle of the cannon at a speed of 11.2 kilometers per second (the escape velocity from Earth) plus a little extra to make up for air-resistence losses in passing through the atmosphere. The spaceship would have to accelerate from rest to 11.2 kilometers per second in the length of the cannon barrel, and this would neatly crush all passengers on board, leaving not a bone unbroken.

The longer the cannon, the lower the acceleration, but, says Dodge, "...even if the gun barrel had the impossible length of forty miles, the poor passenger would be subjected for eleven seconds to a pressure equivalent to a hundred men lying upon him."

But suppose we could overcome that difficulty and somehow picture the spaceship leaving the cannon's mouth with the passengers on it still alive. The spaceship would then be a projectile, moving in response to the force of gravity and nothing more. It would be as unable to alter its course as any other cannonball would.

If the ship were aimed at the Moon and were eventually to land on it, it would have to strike it with a speed of not less than 2.37 kilometers per second (the Moon's escape velocity.) And that, of course, would mean instant death. Or, as Dodge says, "...unless our bullet-ship can carry on its nose a pile of cushions two miles high on which to light, the landing will be worse than the starting!"

Of course, the ship need not land on the Moon. Dodge does not pursue this plan farther, but the cannon may be aimed with such superhuman nicety as to miss the Moon by just the right amount and at just the right speed to cause it to move around the Moon in response to the Lunar gravity and race back to a rendezvous with Earth.

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If the ship then hit the Earth squarely, it would strike at no less than 11.2 kilometers per second, so that the passengers would be fried to death on the passage through the atmosphere before being blasted to death on collision with the solid ground or (very little better at such a speed) the ocean. And if the space ship hit a city, it would kill many thousands of innocents as well.

The original superhuman aim might have brought the ship back to Earth just sufficiently off-center to trap it in Earth's gravity and put it into an orbital path within the upper reaches of Earth's atmosphere. The orbit would gradually decay. Furthermore, some parachute arrangement might then be released to hasten the decay and bring the ship down safely.

But to expect all that of one aim is to expect far too much even if the initial acceleration were not murderous. Scratch the Projectile Plan.

The third scheme is "the Recoil Plan."

Dodge points out that a gun can fire in a vacuum and, in the process, undergo recoil. We can imagine a spaceship which is a kind of mighty gun that could eject a projectile downward, so that it would itself recoil upward. While recoiling, it could eject another projectile downward and give itself another kick upward.

If the ship fired projectiles rapidly enough, it would recoil upward faster and faster and, in fact, recoil itself all the way to the Moon.

Dodge, however, argues that the recoil is increasingly great as the mass of the bullet increases, and that "to be effective its weight [mass really] should be equal to or exceed that of the gun itself."

We must imagine, then, an object that would fire away half of itself, leaving the other half to move upward — and fire half of what is left of itself as it rises, thus moving upward faster — and then fire half of what is now left of itself — and so on, until it reaches the Moon.

But how big must a spaceship be to begin with, if it had to fire away half of itself, then half of what is left, then half of what is left and so on? Dodge says, "An original outfit as big as a mountain chain would be necessary in order to land even a small cage safe upon the lunar surface." He feels that the Recoil Plan is therefore even less practical than the Projectile Plan.

On to the fourth scheme, "the Levitation Plan."

This involves nothing less than the screening, somehow, of the force of gravity. Dodge admits that no such gravity screen is known, but supposes that it might be possible to discover one at some time in the future.

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In a way, a hydrogen-filled balloon seems to nullify gravity. Indeed, it seems to fall upward through the atmosphere and to exhibit "levitation" (from a Latin word meaning "light") rather than "gravitation" (from a Latin word meaning "heavy").

Edgar Allan Poe, in his story *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall*, published 68 years before, in 1835, made use of a balloon to travel to the Moon. A balloon, however merely floats on the denser layer of the atmosphere and does not truly neutralize gravity. When it rises to a height where the thinning atmosphere is no denser than the gas contained within the balloon, there is no further rise. Poe imagined a gas far less dense than hydrogen (something we now know does not, and cannot, exist) but even that could not have lifted a balloon more than a fraction of one percent of the distance to the Moon. Dodge knew that and did not so much as mention balloons.

What Dodge meant was a true gravity neutralization, such as H. G. Wells used in his story *The First Men in the Moon*, published two years before, in 1901.

Of course, if you neutralized gravity, you would have zero weight, but would that alone carry you to the Moon? Would a spaceship with zero weight not merely be subject to the vagaries of every puff of air? Would it not simply drift this way and that in a sort of Brownian motion and even if, eventually (a long eventually, perhaps), it got to the top of the atmosphere and went beyond, might it not then be moving away from the Earth in a random direction that would only come within reach of the Moon as a result of an unusually long-chance coincidence?

Dodge, however, has a better notion. Imagine yourself in a spaceship resting on Earth's equator. Earth is rotating on its axis so that each point on the equator, including the spaceship, is moving about the axis at a speed of just about 0.46 kilometers per second. This is a supersonic speed (about 1.5 Mach), and if you were trying to hold on to an ordinary object that was whirling you about at that speed, you would not be able to hold on for the barest fraction of second.

However, the Earth is very large, and the change in direction from the straight line in the time of one second is so small that the acceleration inward is quite moderate. The force of gravity upon the ship is strong enough to hold it to Earth's surface despite the speed with which it is whirled. (It would have to be whirled about the Earth at 17 times the speed, before gravity would cease being strong enough to hold it.)

But suppose the spaceship has a gravity screen plastered all over its hull

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and that, at a particular moment, the screen is activated. Now, with no gravitation to hold it down, it is cast off from the Earth like a clod of mud from a spinning fly-wheel. It would move in a straight line tangent to the curve of the Earth. The Earth's surface would drop below it, very slowly at first, but faster and faster, and if you were careful to activate the screen at just the right time, the ship's flight would eventually intersect the Moon's surface.

Dodge does not mention that the Earth's curved motion about the Sun would introduce a second factor, and that the Sun's motion among the stars would add a third component. These would represent comparatively minor adjustments, however.

The landing on the Moon would be better than in the previous plans, for a spaceship unaffected by the Moon's gravity need not approach it at anything like its escape velocity. Once the ship is almost touching the Moon, the gravity screen can be turned off and the ship, suddenly subject to the Moon's relatively weak gravity, can drop a few feet, or inches, with a slight jar.

How about the return, though? The Moon rotates on its axis very slowly, and a point on its equator travels at 1/100 the speed of a point on Earth's equator. Using the gravity screen on the Moon will lend the spaceship only 1/100 the velocity it had on leaving Earth, so it will take 100 times as long to travel from Moon to Earth as from Earth to Moon.

However, we can dismiss the whole notion. Albert Einstein promulgated his General Theory of Relativity 13 years after Dodge's article was written, so that Dodge can't be faulted for not knowing that a gravity screen is simply impossible. Scratch the Levitation Plan.

Dodge is most hopeful about his fifth scheme, "the Repulsion Plan." Here it is not just a matter of neutralizing gravity that he hopes for, but some form of repulsive force that would actively overbalance gravitational attraction.

After all, there are two kinds of electrical charge and two kinds of magnetic poles, and in either case, like charges, or like poles, repel each other. Might there not be a gravitational repulsion as well as a gravitational attraction, and might not spaceships someday use a combination of the two, sometimes pushing away from an astronomical body and sometimes pulling toward it, and might this not help take us to the Moon?

Dodge does not actually say there might be such a thing as gravitational repulsion, and his caution is good, for, from the later Einsteinian view, it

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would seem that gravitational repulsion is impossible.

Dodge does mention light pressure, though, pointing out that it can, in some cases, counteract the force of gravity. He uses comets' tails as an example. Gravity would be expected to pull the tails toward the Sun but the solar light pressure pushes them in the opposite direction, overcoming gravitation.

Actually, he is wrong here, for solar light pressure, it turns out, is too weak to do the job. It is the solar wind that does it.

Light pressure might be used as a motive force, to be sure, but it would be too weak to work against the nearby pull of a sizable body, or, for that matter against air-resistance. A spaceship would have to be in fairly deep space to begin with, and it would have to have sails that were extremely thin, and many square kilometers in area.

As a way of lifting a spaceship from the Earth's surface toward the Moon, light pressure, or anything like it, is hopeless. Scratch the Repulsion Plan.

And that's all. Dodge is an intelligent, knowledgeable man who clearly understands science (as of 1903); yet if we consider only his five plans as he describes them, *not one* has the faintest hope of ever allowing human beings to travel from Earth to Moon.

Yet it has been done! My father was alive when that article was written, and he lived to see human beings stand on the Moon.

How is that possible?

Well, have you noticed the word that Dodge omitted? Have you noticed that *he didn't see the truck*? He did not mention the rocket!

There was no reason for him to omit it. Rockets had been known for eight centuries. They had been used in peace and in war. Newton, in 1687, had thoroughly explained the rocket principle. Even earlier, in 1656, Cyrano de Bergerac in his story, *A Voyage to the Moon*, listed seven ways of reaching the Moon, and he *did* include rocketry as one of the methods.

How, then, did Dodge come to leave it out? Not because he wasn't sharp. In fact at the tail end of his article he was sharp-sighted enough to see something in 1903, that I have been laboring madly to get people to see now, in 1983. (I'll discuss that next month.)

No, he didn't mention the rocket because the best of us don't see the truck sometimes. (I wonder, for instance, what trucks all of us are missing right now.)

Dodge *almost* got it with his recoil plan, but for the fact that he made

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an odd blooper. He thought that in order to get a decent recoil the gun must fire a bullet that had a mass at least equal to itself, and that is wrong.

What counts in shot-and-recoil, action-and-reaction, is momentum. When a bullet leaves a gun with a certain momentum, the gun must gain an equal momentum in the opposite direction, and momentum is equal to mass *multiplied by velocity*. In other words, a small mass would produce sufficient recoil, if it moved with sufficient velocity.

In rockets, the hot vapors that are ejected move downward with great velocity and do so continuously, so that the body of the rocket moves up with surprising acceleration considering the small mass of the ejected vapor. It still takes a large mass to begin with to deliver a comparatively small object to the Moon, but the disparity is far, far less than Dodge had feared. Furthermore, the recoil effect is continuous for as long as the fuel is being burned and the vapors ejected, and that is equivalent to a projectile being moved along a cannon tube for hundreds of miles. The acceleration becomes small enough to be borne.

The possessions of a reserve supply of fuel once the rocket is well on its way to the Moon, means the rocket can be maneuvered; its descent to the Moon can be braked; it can take off for Earth again at will; and it can maneuver properly for entry into Earth's atmosphere.

And that is all really, except for two coincidences, one mild and one wild — and you know how I love to find coincidences.

The mild coincidence is this: In the very year that this article was written for *Munsey's Magazine*, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky began a series of articles in a Russian aviation magazine that went into the theory of rocketry, as applied to space travel specifically. It was the very first scientific study of the sort, so that modern astronautic rocketry had its start just at the time that Dodge was speculating about everything *but* rocketry.

The wild coincidence is this: Immediately after Dodge's article, in which he fails to mention the word "rocket," or to realize that it is the rocket, and the rocket alone, that would afford human beings the great victory of reaching the Moon, there is, of course, another article, and what do you think the title of that article is?

Don't bother guessing. I'll tell you.

It is *Rocket's Great Victory*.

No, it isn't somebody else correcting Dodge's omission. It is a piece of fiction with the subtitle "The stratagem by which Willie Fetherston won a race and a bride."

"Rocket," in this story, is the name of a horse.

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Robert Green wrote several stories for F&SF during the 1960's, including the Nebula nominee "Apology for Inky" (January 1966). He lives in Georgia, where he is an Associated Press editor and an accomplished bagpiper. This fine fantasy, about three very different people on a wilderness trip, marks his welcome return to these pages.

The Pallid Piper

BY

ROBERT M. GREEN, Jr.

The man wore faded jeans, a soiled sweatshirt too tight for his pudgy body, a blue sun cap with a visor, and knee-high, thong-laced boots, but he didn't look like an outdoorsman. His pallor gave him away.

He was sitting, leaning against a young pine, on a rock shelf jutting out twenty feet above a wilderness river of root beer-colored water. The nearest town was thirty miles away. The nearest mark of industrial civilization was a railroad trestle one hundred yards downriver, but the three trains a day that crossed it never stopped here. There were two ways of getting here: (1) by canoe, which was thinkable but arduous, and (2) on foot with a backpack, which was simply unthinkable.

The man looked like an incurable city drone. But here he was.

He was holding a sort of wooden flute to his lips, and the movement of his cheeks suggested that he was blowing it. Apparently — like some dog whistles — it was pitched too high for ordinary human ears.

A tall lean tanned man came from behind the pine tree, holding his ears.

"I've heard you do better than that, Luke. That's ugly."

"It's not meant to be alluring," said the pallid man. "It's anxious music. If you don't like it, go away. Nobody can hear it but you."

"I think I'll stay and see what you're up to."

"And spoil the fun? Why don't you wipe me out and get it over with?"

"You know why," said the tanned man. "You're indestructible. And you're useful to me. You separate the sheep from the goats."

"I get my share of sheep, too," said the pallid man.

"Only when you cheat. That's why

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I'm going to keep an eye on you."

"Damn you."

"What a futile remark," said the tanned man.

The tall tanned man walked down the riverbank to the railroad crossing, then scrambled up the rocks to the tracks and walked out to the middle of the trestle. It was ninety feet high and offered a good view of the river both upstream and downstream. He stood and waited. After half an hour he saw a canoe come around a poplar- and juniper-covered point three hundred yards downstream.

He had good eyes. Better than good.

A gray-haired man was paddling stern. A young man was paddling bow, and a young woman was paddling center. They all looked happy and untired.

"I think the old one will pass the test," he said, "depending of course on what kind of test it is, and whether Luke cheats. I can't tell about the others."

He wondered about Luke's new anxious music. The old trick — the alluring music — had always worked beautifully up to a point. Even a saint could be allured. But more than half of the ones allured — even the devout sensualists — managed to get away again. The hook had no barb to it. Anxiety might have a barb, but it would involve work. People's anxieties differed. Luke would have to talk to them first — explore their minds. You didn't have to do that when all you wanted was to allure them.

The old man paddling stern, John Jackson, said:

"When we get past the railroad trestle up ahead it's less than ten minutes to Lumbertown. It's a lively town. We spent a day here in 1932 and had a lot of fun. Maybe we can get rooms in the hotel and sleep on mattresses tonight."

"Why just one night, Grampa?" whined the young man paddling bow. He was Harvey Fiddler, John Jackson's grandson, a Phi Beta Kappa at Yale, but no bargain on an arduous wilderness trip.

"I said it's a lively town, but it's not the kind of town you'd take all this trouble to get to for a two-night stay."

If Harvey had been a ruder boy, he would have sighed, "Big Deal." He didn't have to. The slight shrug of his shoulders and resigned plop of his paddle said it louder than words.

The young lady in the middle, Mary Brady, Harvey's girlfriend, and presumably his fiancée, wanted to know if there would be hot water and a tub. John said he hoped so, and meant it. She would have need of a good soak. Paddling in the middle was wearing. Because of the width of the canoe there, you had to hold the paddle at an awkward, muscle-sapping angle. John had asked Harvey to trade places with her, but Harvey, apparent-

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ly a closet sexist, couldn't accommodate himself to the idea of letting a woman paddle anywhere except in the middle if she felt she had to paddle at all.

John also sincerely hoped that Harvey would sink into a mattress and drift off into the equivalent of two nights' sleep in one. He needed to get shed of both of them for at least two hours, find a dim-lit bar somewhere and soothe himself with ale and pretzels.

John hadn't wanted to come on this trip, but he was easy to flatter. They had told him he was a hero to them. They had their hearts set on seeing the wilderness he had explored in his youth and written about in his nostalgic dotage. Would he be their guide and teacher? Yes, of course. There was a hint, too, from the girl's parents, that he might also be their chaperon. To hell with that. Anything they did was their own business, so long as he didn't catch them at it or hear them doing it.

Then there was the truth. A new widower was an uncomfortable sight for everybody, and his daughter, Harvey's mother, had certainly been the one who put the kids up to luring dear Grampa away to the beloved Canadian river where he could get his mind off Gramma.

It hadn't worked. John had trouble enough making small talk with people his own age, let alone making it with people who were born after he was fifty and over the hill. Not that he didn't love his grandchildren. But love and conversation are different things. What these two talked about was the faults of their friends and the absurdities of parents, teachers, traffic court judges, and all others in authority. They were witty, but wit wears out quickly on a four-day trip up a river with a strong current and half a dozen portages around rapids.

It would have been worse if John hadn't worked out a logistical scheme to cut down on the weight of the luggage.

They had packed only enough food for four days — only enough to get them here, to Lumbertown. Right now they were traveling light. The kids weren't really tired. Just bored, as he was. But the best of the trip was yet to come. A chain of unspoiled lakes bordered by granite cliffs and dotted with pine- and fir-covered islands.

They were aimed in an easterly direction. The sun was sliding down behind the rock-jagged and wooded skyline in back of them; so the town, when they first caught a glimpse of it in a sort of cove to their right, was in shadow, presenting only dim shapes of buildings.

Mary Brady was the first one to notice that something was wrong with the buildings. They were indistinct in the shadows, so she couldn't tell just what it was that wasn't right about them, but at this time of day — in Grampa Jackson's *lively* town — shouldn't

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there be at least one light on somewhere?

Mary pondered about Grampa Jackson. She had always admired him from a distance. His books and lectures on Dark Ages Europe had been famous in her parents' time. He had been her father's hero. And friend, too. He was said to be a "fun person."

When? Maybe in a parlor. Certainly not in the wilderness. All Mary had seen so far on this trip was a glum old Spartan. You couldn't get him to converse or even to smile. All she would concede was that he was a splendid canoeist and a champion camp cook.

Sitting on a pier jutting out from what appeared to be a warehouse was the palest man she had ever seen. His pudgy face was almost luminescent in the gloom. He seemed to be playing a flute.

But there was no sound.

Wait. There *was* a sound. But it wasn't coming from the direction of the man with the flute. It was coming from off across the river somewhere.

It was the sound of a bagpipe playing pibroch, that splendid antique ceremonial music she had never heard outside Scotland.

Mary recognized the tune. It was called, ungrammatically, "Scarce of Fishing." It was a lovely melody, too lovely for the idea the title seemed to convey.

Was that what was the matter with Lumbertown? A scarcity of fish? What would fish have to do with the economy of a lumber town?

The bagpipe went silent in the middle of the first variation, but the tune went on.

She turned her head. Grampa Jackson was whistling it. He continued to whistle as he paddled, even faking the complicated patterns called *taorluaths* in the third variation, by making warbles with his tongue. It was a good tune to whistle, Mary thought, though only a well-fingered pipe could produce the funky honks and burbles necessary in the final variations. Grampa didn't take it that far.

"Scarce of Fishing," she said. "Is it a hint?"

"How did you know that?" asked John Jackson.

"I spent a year with my great aunt in Aberdeen," she said. "I'm a pibroch buff. I though I was alone over here. How did *you* know it?"

"I used to play the bagpipe," he said. "Before you were born. Well, I still play, but only in secret now. Two of my fingers are older than the rest of me, and I can't do the fancy cutting anymore."

"Can you whistle 'The Desperate Battle'?"

"The bird thing," he said. "I'll try it. Bear with me when I get to the *crunluaths*. That's more warbling than I can handle."

John Jackson, too, was beginning to suspect that something was wrong with Lumbertown. Five minutes ago the mere suspicion would have sunk what

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was left of his will to be a good sport. Old people adapt poorly to ugly surprises.

Suddenly he was young again, agile in mind and body, eager to challenge bad luck and turn it into good.

There's no tonic like stumbling onto a fellow devotee of some exotic art. In the days when John had taken his pipes out of the closet, he had played only marches, jigs, reels, strathspeys, and pretty retreats in public. Only in his attic, when no one else was in the house, had he played pibroch. He didn't know anyone else who had ever heard of pibroch or would be likely to enjoy it. It was very old, and — even at its lightest — very majestic for ears attuned to a solid marching or dancing beat.

So what did it matter what was wrong with Lumbertown? He had a friend at last. What did anything matter?

The pier was too high for a canoe landing; so John aimed for a gentle slope of granite, where they could easily pull the canoe, with all its baggage, clear out of the water. The pallid man, having put away his flute, waddled around to meet them and help them land.

"Is there a place where we could sleep tonight?" asked John.

"Yes, indeed," said the pallid man, "if you don't mind sharing quarters with mice and porcupines."

"It's a clear night," said John. "We'll be better off outdoors. When does the grocery store open? I hoped we'd get there before closing time."

"Closing time was thirty-five years ago," said the pallid man.

Harvey turned on the tremulous put-upon voice that he had been using for at least eighteen years to get attention from his mother, Ellie, John Jackson's daughter.

"This is the authentic pits. Next time we have a vacation let's get tarred and feathered and hitch a ride on a rail to the middle of the Jersey meadows."

"Stop whining, Harvey," said Mary. "It isn't the end of the world."

"Damn near," said Harvey.

"It isn't, is it, Mr. Jackson? You've gotten out of worse corners than this."

John Jackson hadn't. He couldn't even think of a worse corner. But this pretty young lady loved pibroch. He wasn't ready to lower himself in her eyes by admitting he was in a situation that was beyond him.

"One solution," he said, "is to turn around and go back down the river. It's downstream, and we can shoot some of the rapids we had to portage on the way up. We could probably do it in two and a half days. We've got a couple of cans of strawberry jam, and plenty of tea and flapjack batter. We can pick blueberries to stir into the flapjacks. And we can shoot frogs and squirrels and porcupines with the .22. We won't starve, and we'll be all right when we get to the mouth of the river.

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I noticed some summer cottages there when we started up. There has to be some kind of store nearby."

"How about the chain of lovely lakes we came to see?" said Mary.

"Well, that's the long way home." She liked lovely lakes as well as pibroch. She preferred them to comfort. Why hadn't he known these things about her? "We won't die going that way. We'll still have the blueberries for the flapjacks, and the frogs, and squirrels and porcupines — plus, if we're lucky, some sitting partridges. It's not sporting to shoot them that way with a shotgun, but we don't have a shotgun. On the other hand, it's not only a longer trip, but it's harder work than coasting down the river with the current. We'll burn our food faster and need more."

"I vote for the lakes," said Mary. "We need to burn off some city fat. And we need still water and islands and cliffs and pines. What did we come here for?"

"God bless you," said John Jackson.

A tall lean man strode toward them from the shadows of the deserted town buildings.

"I would like to make a suggestion," he said. "Your first portage from here to the start of the lakes is over five miles long over rough ground up steep hills with loose boulders, and down into ravines full of underbrush. I doubt if the trail has been used in ten years. you'll need to nourish yourself well before you start."

"With what?" said Harvey. "I vote we sleep late and then coast down the river."

"There's more nourishment in fish than in flapjacks," said the tall man.

"This is a poor time to fish," said the pallid man. "And it's a damned poor river to fish."

The tall man came up close to John.

"Look into my eyes," he said.

John looked into his eyes. The tall man said no more. His eyes said, "Trust me. Do what I say."

"All right," said John to Mary and Harvey. "Let's go fishing."

"Not me," said Harvey. "It's getting dark and it's mosquito time. I'm going to start a smoky fire and stay close to it. You and Mary go get yourselves eaten up. You won't catch anything. We've been fishing this river off and on all the way, and all we ever caught was an old inner tube."

"You see what I mean?" said the pallid man.

"Let's go Mary," said John. "We'll paddle up a couple of hundred yards and let the canoe drift down any old way while we both put out lines on different sides of the boat. If we catch too many, we've got salt, too. We can make some of them last a little longer."

They took everything out of the canoe except the paddles, rods, a net, and a small gaff. Then they pushed off into the river.

"There's a nice level bit of greensward over there by the old school-

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house," said the tall man to Harvey. "I'll help you set up camp."

"No, thanks," said Harvey. "Let *them* set it up in the dark when they get back. I'm just going to make a little fire of twigs and grass to keep the bugs off me while I pop into the sleeping bag and rig up my net. Then I'm going to utter a zillion z's."

"Suit yourself," said the tall man. "If you do need help, please call me. My name is Josh, and I'll be in earshot."

"Hey, Josh," called the pallid man, who had gone back to his seat on the old pier. "Come over here. I need to have a talk with you."

"Right away, Luke."

John Jackson was whistling the ominously monotonous second variation of "A Flame of Wrath for Padruig Caogach" when he reached the first bend above the deserted town. At that point he stopped whistling and turned the canoe broadside to the current.

"This is the place," he said. "Let's get our lines out and troll."

Mary handed him his rod. They both cast upstream, then sat on the floor and drifted.

"I know what you were whistling," she said. "The Squint-eyed Patrick. It's weird."

"It's spooky. Do you know the story?"

"No. Just the tune."

"The piper went to this town to get revenge on the killer of his squint-eyed brother. The people in the town protected the killer, so the piper and his friends set fire to the townspeople's houses in the dark. Then the piper stood out in the street and played this tune while they burned to death. He made it up for the occasion."

"Every time you think you understand those old barbarians, you hear another story like that. Hey. HEY! I've got a *fish*, Grampa!"

"Don't call me 'Grampa.' Hey, HEY! I've got a fish, too!"

"You're interfering with my game, Joshua. I thought you weren't going to do that."

"You misunderstood me if you thought that, Luke," said the tanned man. "I can't destroy you, and I won't keep you from trying your tricks, but I'll help your victims if they ask for my help."

"You have tricks, too," said the pallid man. "I thought that was beneath you."

"Only one trick, Luke. Did you see how Jackson looked me in the eye? He *believed* he was going to catch fish; and he's *going* to catch fish."

"Well, tell me something else, Joshua. How do you like what's going on between that old man and the pretty young girl?"

"Nothing's going on between them except that they're catching fish."

"I thought you were better attuned to people, Joshua," said the pallid man. "Every time they look at each

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other, their hearts pound. I call it incipient hanky-panky, and I consider it disgusting."

"Not disgusting, Luke. A little dangerous, maybe. Besides, it's *your* hanky-panky, not theirs. I heard you make that bagpipe music."

Ten minutes after Grampa and Mary had gone off in the canoe, it began to dawn on Harvey that he may have been behaving badly. Well, nobody else had been behaving truly well, but there wasn't much he could do about anybody else's behavior, and there were a few things he could do about his own. For example, he could build a real fire — not a halfhearted one of twigs and grass.

Next to the abandoned schoolhouse was an old shed that had collapsed into a heap of broken flat boards and beams, all corrugated by porcupine teeth. He got the ax out of one of the canvas duffel bags and split enough kindling to get a fire going, then enough to firewood to keep it going all night if necessary. The fireplace was no work. There were at least three of them on the greensward. Harvey wondered if they had had been built by other disappointed campers in search of a night's soft living in lively Lumbertown.

After he had his fire going, he laid out the sleeping bags side by side, five feet apart. He had learned that it could be a terrible thing for a camper to wake up in the middle of the night and find himself in an unfamiliar place with no friends visible or audibly snoring nearby.

Then he lit a cigarette and sat on the ground, staring at the fire. It took him back to when he was about four, toasting marshmallows at a bonfire in the woods across the street from home. One of his damned cousins — he could have sworn it was Henry Jackson, but to this day Henry insisted it was a bird — took his marshmallow. A bird! Good God!

Well, it wasn't anything to make a big fuss about, they all told him. There were plenty of other marshmallows. They couldn't understand that it wasn't *another* marshmallow he wanted, it was *his* marshamllow. And why did everybody like Henry better than him?

Mommy understood. He sat on her lap and cried into her shoulder and she sang — she sang....

He was hearing it now! Only it wasn't Mommy's voice. It was a sweet, sad violin. No, lower than a violin, but not a cello, either.

A viola.

It was playing:

"Sweetest little fellow, everybody knows. Don't know what to call him but he's mighty like a rose."

- "So I bet they called him Rose," he said, weeping and laughing at the same time. "They better not call *me* Rose."

It was funny. Mommy laughed.

No. Mommy didn't laugh. Mommy wasn't here. Nobody laughed. So it

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wasn't funny, because there was nobody to laugh at it.

It was sad.

Harvey felt very sorry for himself. Nobody loved him.

The viola finished the first tune and went on to "Baby floats a silver moon—" Mommy used to sing that, too.

Then "Sonny Boy."

"Friend may forsake me. Let them all forsake me."

His face was sopping with tears.

Then the viola turned into a violin and got higher and shriller until it hurt his ears and made him tremble. He felt a need to break something, and leaned toward the fire to snatch a piece of kindling that the flames hadn't caught yet.

But instead of snatching the kindling he put his hand into the fire. He had to. Then he screamed and snatched it back.

"Why the hell did I do that? Well, it's not badly burned. It will blister and Mary will feel sorry for me. I'll tell her some kind of cute little animal got into the fire and I had to get it out. Now, let's see. What kind of cute little animal would walk or fall into a fire? I once saw a bat dart into a fire."

How could she not feel as sorry for him as he felt for himself?

The music stopped. It had done its bit.

John Jackson stayed by the riverbank to clean and fillet nine fish into a bucket. The tenth pike, the biggest one of all — at least twenty inches — was one of the five that Mary had caught. She had to show it to Harvey uncut and unscaled.

It was too dark to see where she was putting her feet down or she would have skipped to the fire, which lit up his face and the faces of two strangers, the tall nice one, and the fat creepy one.

"Look what I've got, Harvey. I pulled it in by myself without a net or a gaff. I got five pike altogether, and Grampa got five, too. He's cleaning the rest. I don't know what in the world we're going to do with them."

Harvey and the tall stranger both walked toward her to look at the fish.

"It's a biggie, isn't it?" said Harvey, holding out his hands to take it.

She noticed that a white rag was wrapped around one of his hands.

"What's the matter with your hand?"

Harvey gave a nervous laugh.

"Some crazy little animal — I think it was a baby squirrel—"

The tall stranger cleared his throat.

Harvey looked at him, then back at Mary.

"No, there wasn't any crazy little animal. I just got nervous and put my damn hand in the damn fire. It's all right. Joshua put some salve on it and wrapped it up."

"It will be all right in the morning," said Joshua. "Not even a blister."

Harvey put the thumb and fore-

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finger of his good hand in the eyes of the pike and held it up to the light of the fire.

"It's a beauty," he said. "Where's Grampa?"

"Down by the river."

"Well, we can't have this mounted. It won't keep till we can get it to a taxidermist."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she said. "I just wanted you to see it."

"It's great. I'll take it back to Grampa and help him clean the rest. I made a kettleful of tea. Go sit by the fire and have some. You can clean the fish gunk off your hands in that bucket. It's pretty clean water. I just brought it up from the river to rinse out the teakettle."

She washed, poured a mug of tea, and added a spoonful of sugar and a squirt of condensed milk out of a can with two holes in the top. Then she sat back and looked up at Cygnus the Swan overhead.

"It was a play for sympathy," said the pallid man. "I wouldn't give him too much if I were you. He'll just take advantage."

"How do you know?"

"We both know," said the tall man. "Luke's partly right: he feels scorned, unwanted. We all look for sympathy when we feel that way. But he's wrong when he says not to give it. Don't goad him into asking again."

"He's got to grow up," she said. "Look, I'm engaged to him. I love him. But he's got to grow up. Let him keep asking until he gets tired of it."

That night, after making a smoke fire downwind of the campsite, John Jackson smoked most of the fillets so they would keep for a few days.

In the morning John invited the two strangers to join them, and they breakfasted on the unsmoked fish.

"What's your plan?" asked the pallid man. "Are you still going to make all those rough portages with an injured man?"

"I'm all right," said Harvey.

"Let's hope you stay that way," said the pallid man. "I have a suggestion. Even with the extra fish, you'll have an arduous, hungry trip back to civilization. At least four days of it if you're properly fed and fit, and two or three days more if you're not. Now there's a ravine half a mile north of the blazed portage trail between the first and second lakes you come to, and beside it there's a stone cabin that belongs to a Toronto hunting club. It has beds with mattresses — which might or not interest you — but it also has a larder stocked with canned gourmet delicacies. Pâté de foie gras, caviar, olives, artichoke hearts, beef, ham — need I go on?"

"That's for me," said Harvey.

"And it's there for the taking?" said John. "We just walk in and help ourselves?"

"There's also wine and beer and scotch whiskey."

"You haven't answered my question."

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"Well, it isn't quite that easy," said the pallid man. "There's are no windows and a strong lock on the door. If it were on a well-traveled route, somebody would have knocked in a wall and cleaned the place out before this, but the only people that come this way are clean-cut campers. Like you. They wouldn't knock in walls."

"Of course not," said John.

"I have a way with locks," said the pallid man. "I can sing to them and make them fly open. The men in this club are all rich. They won't notice anyone's been there. We can stock up for two weeks, and they won't notice anything is missing."

"*I* would," said John Jackson. "It can be a rough, cold trip up here in hunting season. Even a jaded rich man would start salivating long before he got here. He'd have his mind on a warm drink, and a can of something tasty — maybe something specific, maybe just the can we'd have taken with us if we broke in there."

"We could leave money to pay for it."

"The last thing in the world a rich hunter would be salivating for would be a pile of paper money."

"Oh, come on, Grampa," said Harvey. "This is supposed to be an enjoyable trip, not an endurance contest."

"I'm sorry, Harvey. I don't know what I would do it we were about to starve. I hope I would still be as hard-nosed as I am now, but maybe I wouldn't. But the truth is, we *aren't* about to starve."

"Why don't we put our gear together and get started?" said Mary.

"I've taken a liking to you people," said the pallid man. "May I hike along with you for a mile or two?"

John Jackson, born and reared a compulsive Nice Guy, surprised himself by saying, "I'd rather you didn't."

"If you insist," said the pallid man.

"Insist," said the tall tanned man.

"I insist," said John Jackson.

The pallid man shrugged and walked away. John Jackson went down to the river's edge to pick up the canoe. The tall man walked with him.

"What's gotten into Grampa, I wonder?" said Harvey. "I've never seen him like this."

"Neither have I," said Mary. "It makes me all tingly."

Harvey frowned. He glanced furtively at Mary and then away from Mary.

"I suppose I've made an enemy of your friend," said John Jackson.

"He was already your enemy. And he's no friend of mine."

"What has he got against me?"

"I can't explain," said the tall man. "It's a grudge that goes way, way back."

"But I've never seen him before."

"Yes, you have. You wouldn't recognize him. He never looks the same twice."

"What does he want to do to us?"

"Taint you. Contaminate you. De-

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stroy you. Don't worry, I'll go with you."

"Thank you. I intended to invite you, but—"

"Don't worry about your food. I don't eat."

"I wonder," said John Jackson. "Wouldn't it have been better if I'd let what's his name—"

"Luke."

"If I'd let Luke come along so I could keep an eye on him?"

"That wouldn't help. Don't worry, he won't ambush you or do anything physical to you. He has no physical power at all. If he had come along, you would have noticed that at once. He wouldn't have offered to carry anything. If you had asked him politely to pick a bedding roll or even three canoe paddles, he would have made some excuse and refused. He can't even harm a butterfly. All he can do is wheedle and cajole in a thousand different ways. That's his total strength. But I warn you, it's a very great strength."

It was a rugged five miles. The trail wound through broken boulders, up slippery, mossy declivities, down into thicket-choked ravines, and around one squashy, slurpy end of a huge yellow moss and tamarack bog. They were all heavily loaded, and John had planned three rest stops. It would take them half a day to get to the first lake.

At the start, John carried the canoe, with paddles and fishing rods roped to the floorboards. Harvey had been expected to carry to carry the canoe, out of respect for John's seventy years, but his burned hand was still tender, and a strong hand grip was needed from time to time to haul a canoe over rough ground like this. The big basket that held the food and utensils had straps that could be fitted over his shoulders, and a belt that went around his middle. Even with short rations, it was still heavy, but he didn't have to use his hands.

The duffel that held three sleeping bags, soap, toilet paper, and changes of clothing also had straps that went over Mary's shoulders. Joshua, the tall tanned man, had volunteered to carry it, but Mary was touchy about macho solicitude, and refused to let him touch it. John worked out a compromise. At each rest stop, Joshua would take somebody else's load, and everybody would have one chance to walk unencumbered.

For the first half hour, Mary walked beside John, and they chatted about pibroch. Two aficionados with the same enthusiasm are never at a loss for words.

No, he told her, he wasn't Scottish. English, Dutch, and a little Irish, but no Scottish.

"I spent half a year in Edinburgh, studying Gaelic. I was doing a book on all the languages of the sixth century Celts. A friend took me around to listen to pibroch, and I didn't like it much at first, and then it grew on me. Some music — Louis Armstrong, for in-

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stance — hits you right away, or it doesn't hit you at all. Pibroch grows on you."

"Because it isn't just music," she said. "It's a form of speech."

"Oh, yes," he said. "Oh, yes. What a marvelous way to put it!"

Harvey, who was walking about ten feet in front of them, tripped over a piece of broken rock and fell to his knees with a yell.

"I'll bet he did that on purpose," she said. "Keep going, Grampa John. I'll go look after him."

The tanned man took the big basket off Harvey's shoulders and put it on his own.

Harvey got up and walked on, beside Mary, limping a little.

"It's O.K., Grampa!" he shouted. "I'll get along."

Mary stayed beside Harvey. John could hear them chattering together, and laughing occasionally.

To his horrified surprise, he found himself throbbing with jealousy! He hadn't felt that wild irrational pang for half a century!

He walked more slowly, hoping they would overtake him and let him into their conversation. They slowed down, too. He wondered if they had done it on purpose, and if so, whose idea had it been.

Joshua *did* catch up to him.

"Let them have each other for a while," he said. "Or are you slowing down because you're tired?"

"I don't know why I get the feeling you're looking into my mind," said John Jackson. "Are you?"

"Trust your feelings," said Joshua. "You did when I told you to go fishing in the river at Lumbertown."

"Is it possible for an old, old man to fall into the maelstrom of puppy love?"

"Of course."

"My wife died six months ago," said John Jackson. "We had a good marriage. Of course there isn't any such thing as perfect communication between any two people, but we misunderstood each other less than most of the spouses we knew. I feel that we're still married. Do you know what I mean? But of course you do."

"Of course I do."

"Then why this? And why is it so damned urgent? I can tell myself all the sensible things. Look, we have one subject in common: antique bagpipe music. If we ran out of that, we'd have about as much rapport as a Martian and a Saturnian marooned on a desert asteroid. But I can't talk myself out of it. I'm ecstatic one minute and jealous the next. It's doing something to me. I can't handle it at my age."

"That live coal smolders in you as long as you live, John. All it takes is the right kind of bellows to turn it into a flame. Don't blame yourself. You have no control over the bellows."

"Who has? The pudgy guy with the fishbelly complexion? Luke?"

"Luke. Yes. Who do you think provided the bagpipe music? That's one of his strategies for destruction."

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"What can I do about it?"

"Nothing easy, Mr. Jackson. I suffer for you. Call me, when it seems unbearable. And console yourself with the knowledge that of all the varieties of love, this is the shortest-lived."

"What about *her?*"

"I don't know. She's drawn to you. She heard the bagpipes, too. But it isn't unusual for someone her age to reach the heights or depths of what you call puppy love with someone your age."

"Ouch," said John Jackson. "That hurt."

"I know it did. I would imagine she has outgrown her puppy love for your grandson, and is a little impatient with him. At the same time she is feeling a deep sense of charity toward him. She's being a mother to him. That's good. Right now, he needs a mother."

"Maybe so. Maybe he needs a daddy, too, with a switch."

"Maybe he needs a kindly cracker-barrel old *grand*daddy," said Joshua.

"I couldn't be that in a million years," said John Jackson.

"Come as close as you can. When you have a chance. I don't need to warn you that Luke is following us. He's keeping out of sight, but he's not far behind us. Be the best you are able to be. And remember to call me when you need me."

Joshua dropped back to talk to Mary and Harvey.

John trudged ahead mechanically in a gray limbo of his own desolation. What was he saving himself for anyway? What did he care about Luke and his strategies of destruction. On the other hand, what if destruction didn't mean death? What if it were eternal life in an infinity of broken boulders?

After an hour of lurching and staggering over a charred desert of broken rock, they came to the rim of a thicket-choked ravine full of the singing and chattering of birds and chipmunks.

John declared a half hour rest. Harvey went down into the thicket with a .22 rifle to try to shoot some tidbits of fresh meat. Joshua wandered up the edge of the ravine to climb a tall lone pine about half a mile away and look for signs of the pallid man, Luke.

This tableland was a vast storehouse of old dead wood. John gathered an armful — enough when ignited to heat up a kettle of tea. Mary sat watching him, swinging her legs over the lip of the ravine.

"How did this country look the last time you were here?" she asked. "As grim as this?"

"No. Well of course the rocks were broken and jumbled; I think the glacier did that. But they weren't charred. And there were lots of big pines and cedars and firs. I guess loggers and careless campers took care of all that."

He brought her a mug of tea, but he didn't sit down beside her. He walked off about fifteen feet, far enough to make conversation difficult, and sat down to sip his own tea and stare back

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toward Lumbertown — in the same direction Joshua in his tree was staring.

"Well, he's a man of the world," she said to herself. "He's been everywhere, communed with great souls, done out-of-the-ordinary things. I suppose I am pretty boring." She tried to shrug and put on a who-cares smile, but she was hurt. She'd learned in collage that you can sometimes laugh off a hurt. She laughed, and said, "I'll bet what he misses from his last trip here are all the dinosaurs." She would have to save that for Harvey. He would laugh with her.

She was still hurt. Over a goddamn *grand*father.

She heard a squeal from somewhere. Down in the ravine? Had Harvey wounded some little creature? She hadn't heard the crack of the rifle.

No, it was a bagpipe, playing some kind of a jig. She didn't know the name of it, but John Jackson would. What the hell, maybe she did bore him, but they did have *that* subject of conversation.

She walked over to him.

"Do you hear it?" she said.

John liked a few of the funky jigs full of honks and burps, and he had to admire any jig played fast by a good piper. But admiration wasn't the same as enjoyment. Two jigs was about all he could tolerate at one sitting. He was about to tell her that, but he didn't.

What he said was, rudely:

"I don't like jigs."

She was stung, and her first impulse was to play the same game: cut him with an equivalent rudeness and go off into proud silence.

But she wasn't like that. She didn't like walls.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've admired you for years. I was thrilled when I found out you loved something I loved, and I hoped we could be friends."

"Admired me? Good Lord! For what?"

"Your wisdom, for one thing."

She saw him wince.

"All right," she said. "I won't admire you, but I'd like to like you. As a friend."

"I don't know if it can be done," said John Jackson. "I think you ought to know, I'm in disguise. Underneath all this admirable wisdom there's a lovelorn, very goddamned importunate Lord Byron. I'm not sure it's possible for me to be a friend to a beautiful young woman."

Mary wondered if he thought he was shocking her. If so, his generation gap was showing.

At this point the bagpipe sound became a violin sound that started out high and thin, then broadened and deepened to a cello sound. The music was an adagio, not sensuous in the romantic style, but sad and wistful and at the same time thoughtful in the baroque style.

"Take off your mask," she said. "If it's just your inhibitions that stand between us, get rid of them. *Be* Lord Byron. Then you won't have to be

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rude. We can be friends."

"If Byron had gotten to my age he'd have found the only choice was between being rude and being a figure of fun. Eros is an absurdity for an old man."

"Well," she said, "if you were really Lord Byron and had to have a goddamned harem, it would be an absurdity, all right."

"Lord Byron wasn't a harem man. He was a romantic. He loved one person at a time."

"That's what I like," she said. "One at a time, and no regrets. Well, listen, Lord Byron, if it's got to either rudeness or absurdity, here's a little bit of absurdity I'd like to submit for your profound consideration."

To the accompaniment of the deceptively reasonable sweetness of the cello adagio, she unveiled herself for him.

At first, John told himself that it was not Mary herself but the music that was putting the words into her mouth. Then a plaintive flute came in on top of the cello, and John stopped telling himself anything at all. He surrendered to it.

She told him that she had sensed possibilities in Harvey. That was what she had fallen in love with — possibilities, not Harvey himself. She had thought that a long engagement would give the possibilities time to turn into actualities, but after six months, they were still a long way from developing into anything at all. Then they had come on this canoe trip, which she had hoped would put a whip to the possibilities. The trip had done no such thing, but it had brought her John Jackson, who was the embodiment of all those beloved unborn possibilities that had captured her heart.

"Obviously, we can't get married," she said. "Our tastes in what they call life-styles are conditioned by the times we grew up in. It will take a year, maybe less, for us to learn to hate each other's reminiscences and clichés and tastes in pop music. What will we ever do with each other if we ever stumble arm in arim into a discotheque? But if you're game, it could be a damn good interlude while it lasted."

She stopped and let the cello take over the solo part. It soared upward through violadom to violindom.

He looked into her eyes. Through his tears into her tears. She looked very brave, as though she were torn between the temptation to look down demurely and the determination to meet his gaze.

They kissed, and the violin sobbed.

Then there was a human rustling in the underbrush of the ravine, and they separated quickly.

Harvey climbed up toward them, carrying the .22 rifle and nothing else.

"Couldn't see a thing to shoot but sparrows. Even if I could have hit one, what the hell would we have done with it?"

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John wondered if he had seen the kiss.

There was no more conversation for the rest of the crossing of the charred rock desert. Joshua started to say something to John just before they came to the next rest stop, which was right out in the middle of acres of desolation, with not even a scrub pine in sight. It was John's turn to go empty-handed; so he couldn't pretend to be tired, but he didn't want to hear anything from Joshua; and Joshua read his mind and walked in a different direction.

At this stop they sat on broken rocks in the hot sun and passed around a canteen full of warm brown water. Harvey sat next to Mary on a rock barely big enough for one person. Joshua paced. John cleaned his fingernails with a pocketknife. The unseen musician played a strange kind of vo-do-de-o-do jazz on a Jew's harp. It was interrrupted by barnyard noises — braying trombones, whinnying trumpets, crowing clarinets.

The next stop was on the edge of a yellow moss and tamarack bog. Harvey sat next to Mary again, and John wadded out into knee-deep muck that underlay the moss to hunt bullfrogs with the .22. He came back with nine. Enough to provide three pairs of frog's legs for each of the eating members of the party for breakfast.

"Next stop is Blue Lake," he said. "I'll clean these when we get there. Can't clean 'em in this stuff here."

Mary was full of tears today. They flowed again at first sight of Blue Lake. It had come as a surprise. First they had dropped out of the wasteland into the cool comfort of a pine woods on a level floor carpeted with rust-colored needles, then they had been stopped abruptly by the end of the floor. They were on the rim of a thirty-foot sheer granite cliff. Below them was an irregular blue-green lake of bays and inlets, about ten acres in size, she guessed, unless there was a lot more of it hidden out of sight. It was surrounded by cliffs topped with pine forests., though down below she could see a few jutting shelves of rock which made good campsites if you could get down to them. Up here was too far from water for cooking and washing.

Out in the middle was a jagged little island with one huge pine in its middle, and nothing else but underbrush — junipers and blueberry bushes, she guessed.

And the tears ran rivers.

John led them to a natural cleft in the cliff which made a natural stairway down which they could carry the canoe and luggage to a rock shelf at the water's edge.

After they had made camp, they still had two hours to kill before suppertime. Mary wanted a bath, but she was old-fashioned enough not to want to splash around naked in front of the men.

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John pointed to the island.

"There's a rock on the other side of that island that rises up sheer, three feet out of the lake. You can dive into five feet of water, and there are natural steps for climbing out. I camped there for two days when I was a teenager. Why don't you paddle her out there, Harvey?"

"My hand still hurts from the fire. Why don't you paddle yourself, baby?"

"*You* paddle me, John," she said. "I'm all tired and sticky."

"Go ahead, Grampa," said Harvey. "I don't give a damn."

John shrugged, slid the canoe into the water, held it while Mary tiptoed up to the bow seat, then pushed off and jumped into the stern in one practiced movement.

She sat on the floorboards with her back against the seat, looking into his eyes.

The unseen piper was through with tunes for the time being. He was playing a single note, tremolo, on an incredibly high-pitched instrument. Higher even than a piccolo. It sent waves up and down John's body. He wanted to do something violent. Smash a porcupine with a rock. Tear a branch off a tree.

"You'll notice," he said, struggling to keep his voice calm, "that the water here is clear. Not root beer color like all the other lakes and rivers in the area. It looks like a miraculous blessing, but it could be a curse. Is something killing off the organisms that turn water root beer brown?"

"Have you ever heard of it killing off campers?"

"No."

"So let's settle for the miraculous blessing."

As they were pulling the canoe up on the shore of the island, she said, "I told Harvey about our plans. Yours and mine."

"How did he take it?" John felt a rage building up in him, but he swallowed it back, knowing that it wasn't real anger — only that damned tin whistle, or whatever it was.

"He's known for the last three days the engagement was a poor thing, but of course it embarrasses him to have it put off. He won't say so, but I think he's afraid it will make him look like a fool. People will wonder about it."

John thought if only the shrill tootler would get off that one note it would possible to bask here on this island. The tootler apparently heard his wish, and malevolently granted it by playing "The Flight of the Bumblebee." John gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

"It is humiliating for Harvey," said John.

"Why should it be? Why can't he be reasonable?"

"Because he's a human being," John snapped. Then he said, "I'm sorry. I'm tense."

"So am I. That's why I want to dip into cold water. Are you coming in with me?"

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"No," said John. "I'm going to stay over on this side of the island where Harvey can watch me."

"What if I get a cramp?"

"It isn't over your head there," said John. "Give me half of your soap before you go. I'm going to take a dip over here."

"Flight of the Bumblebee" ended, and the whistle went back to its one hideously thrilling chalk-on-blackboard note.

He stripped and eased into the cold water where it was three feet deep. Then he splashed water on himself, lathered himself, threw the soap onto the dry rock shore, and ducked underwater.

The sound of the whistle pursued him even there and spoiled the fun of porpoising around; so he walked back to dry land again, clean but unrefreshed.

"You look like Zeus," she said.

He looked around but couldn't see her.

"I'm still over here, peeking through a juniper bush. Come on over. I look like Aphrodite."

"No. You come on over *here*," he said.

"Harvey will see us," she said.

"Nothing he can see us doing over here will be as bad as what he'll imagine us doing over there."

"I don't think you really want me," she said.

"I seem to be in love with you."

"If you were forty years younger you wouldn't have to be in love with me to come charging over here."

That stung.

"I wish I were old enough not to have to struggle against it right now," he said.

"You know," she said, "there really has to be more to love than talking about pibroch."

"Yes, but it doesn't have to include destroying my grandson."

"I told you: he knows about us; he accepts it."

"In his intellect. But I keep seeing him looking over this way. He's not looking with his intellect."

"I love you for saying that. But whatever you think, I'm not a bitch or tease. It's this damnable tinnitus I've got. It keeps ringing and ringing in my ears. I keep looking for something to smash, and something keeps saying, 'why not Harvey?' "

"It's not tinnitus. It's tin whistle. I hear it, too. I think I know where it's coming from, but I can't do anything about it now. We'll have to try to endure it for a while."

"I'll try," she said. "I'm going to dry off now and get dressed. I'll leave the towel on top of the juniper, so you can dry off, too. Then let's don't go straight back to Harvey, shall we? Let's canoodle a little around the lake until I feel less murderous."

Harvey gathered an armful of good thick dead branches and brought them

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down to the campsite. Then he went up to the clifftop for more wood. There wasn't enough down below for a lasting fire. From up there he watched Mary and Grampa get into the canoe. It hurt but it was funny, too. Grampa held the canoe while Mary got in and sat down in the bow facing to the rear with her butt on the wet floorboards and back against the front seat. That would be Grampa's scenario: 1930s. He would sing a Bing Crosby song to her while she batted her great big blue eyes at him. Jeepers creepers!

He didn't really blame Grampa. A guy didn't get much at his age — certainly nothing as much as Mary. She would probably kill him, though. He was strong for his age, and maybe he was potent as a billy goat, but that wasn't the way she would kill him.

She would break his old, old heart. That's what she would do. She'd done it to half a dozen guys in school. It had gotten so hardly anyone who knew her would take her out on a date anymore.

Hardly anybody but Harvey. Sometimes she hated him, sometimes she loved him — but always she was hooked on him and he was hooked on her. The reason was that in spite of her smart talk and his Phi Beta Kappa key, they were both nothings, and however far apart two nothings get from each other, they always end up falling back into each other's vacuum.

Old Jack Merkle, his roommate, was always asking you to define your terms. "Define a nothing," he would say.

"Well, if everybody in your family is outstanding — like being a published poet or president of some organization or in Who's Who, or even just the class cutup or the village atheist — and you aren't outstanding in anything ... then you're a nothing."

"Well, I'm not outstanding in anything," old Jack would say.

"How about your family?"

"Well, they aren't either," old Jack would say.

"That makes you a something. Only outstanding people can hatch out a nothing."

"Define outstanding," old Jack would say.

"Well, in Mary's family and in my family it's the ability to win prizes for dazzling accomplishments, combined with the inability to make very much money. My family includes a Pulitzer winner, a Légion d'Honneur winner, and a winner of thirty-seven blue ribbons and fifty-two red ribbons at various art shows. Mary's family includes as Emmy winner, a National Teacher of the Year award winner, and an appointee to Harry Truman's cabinet — which has to be considered some kind of an award for *something*. Must I go on?"

Harvey chuckled at the recollection of his own wry wit, which had helped light his way through many glooms. As had his quiet, plodding competence. He was always secretary or treasurer of whatever organization he chose to join. It was the consolation

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prize for honorable nothingness. So was money. A somebody always had to go around with hat in hand; a trusted nobody climbed the old ladder — maybe to the third or fourth rung from the top — but never all the way to the top rung; that was reserved for Mr. In-Between.

"I'm all right," said Harvey. "I'm all right."

Moreover, he was a damn good fireplace builder. Mary would congratulate him on his fine work when they came back.

And when Mary *really* came back — certainly inside of six months — she would rediscover all the praiseworthy and lovable little attributes of nothingness. They would have been rendered even more poignant by her sojourn among the maddening pride-destroying attributes of somethingness.

Poignant! That was the word for whatever it was that was invading him now.

The mysterious invisible musician (who was either in his head or hiding back in the underbrush) was playing *poignant* music on a gypsy violin.

"Un Bel Di," from *Madame Butterfly*.

Could anyone — highbrow or lowbrow, somebody or nobody — listen to "Un Bel Di" without dropping at least one sloppy tear?

Gulping at the lump in his throat, blinking the blur out of his eyes, Harvey poignantly carried his last armload of firewood down the steep trail that led to the foot of the cliff.

He laid the wood by his fireplace, and looked out across the lake until he saw Grampa and Mary. At least they were keeping in sight. That was nice of them.

The invisible musician stopped playing his tune.

Harvey heard another tune. Singing carried well across a lake on a windless day.

The tune was familiar to Harvey. Grampa used to sing it to him when he was little. It was a Jelly Roll Morton tune. "219 done took my baby away; 219 ... took my babe away; 217. ... bring her back someday."

Damn! Harvey had been sure Grampa was going to sing a Bing song or a Frankie song. That wouldn't have turned Mary on.

But Jelly Roll might.

Jelly Roll almost did. But the background music was wrong. It should have been a sweetly plangent, melancoly whorehouse piano, but it wasn't. It was that damned tin whistle. Fortunately, it didn't try to compete by playing a melody of its own. It sustained one note. But it was a wrong note.

Mary looked toward the wide ledge under the cliff where Harvey was splitting firewood. It was a nice sight. Harvey was always good at things like that. He liked to deprecate himself, but he wasn't really what he said he was — a "median nothing." His family and

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her family had made him feel that way. he wasn't, by their standards, "gifted."

But he was, by any standards, "sterling." Of all the guys she had ever dated — maybe twenty — she could think of only three who might be called "gifted," and only one — Harvey — who was definitely "sterling."

Whatever happened between her and Harvey, she thought (and she was willing to accept the possibility of being estranged forever), she would always think of him with that same warm glow of emotional security she had felt on Christmas Eve when she was a little girl.

But the tin whistle became an orgiastic alto saxaphone, and it occurred to her that if she did go back to Harvey, and if Harvey took her back (which he would because he was sterling), she would never make peace with his lack of enormous enthusiasms.

She looked at John Jackson, who wasn't singing now, but seemed to be reveling in the wails of the sax. He had enormous enthusiasms.

Then she looked back at Harvey, hoping for another rush of the old Christmas Eve glow, but her eye was caught by a movement on the rim of the cliff above him.

The tall tanned man, the one called Joshua, was pacing back and forth up there, pacing back and forth, sometimes looking down toward Harvey, sometimes looking toward the canoe.

They passed a point of land sheltering an inlet that had been out of sight until now.

"Good Lord," said John.

He steered the canoe into the inlet.

Mary, facing backward in the canoe, didn't see what he was aiming for.

"I thought we weren't going to go out of Harvey's sight," she said.

"Turn around and look," he said.

The inlet was a private harbor for a neat little saltbox cottage, white with green shutters and steep gabled roof. Beside it, a Land-Rover was parked. In front of it was a small motorboat, tied to a low dock. A black-haired woman wearing peach slacks and a navy blue shirt waved at them.

"Sacrilege," said John Jackson.

"I don't know. It's a pretty cottage."

"Not the cottage. The *road!* It would have to be at least twenty miles long. Can you imagine trying to build a cottage here without a road? Hauling boards and window glass and God knows what else overland or in canoes? If there's a road, there'll be other cottages soon. Maybe already. What color will this water be five years from now?"

"Let's turn around before Harvey gets ideas. We don't have to visit the house, do we?"

"No," said John.

Harvey had only three logs left to split when he noticed that the canoe had gone out of sight.

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"Well, after all," he said. "Why shouldn't they go off by themselves?"

But he was hurt. And the gypsy violin played the Love Death from *Tristan*. Of course it was only one voice; so it couldn't play in harmony with itself. But it seemed to, and the seeming voices, one male and one female, sang "Love, love, love," and "alas, alas, alas," until Harvey was trembling all over from an overcharge of both.

Love and alas.

That was when he miscalculated with the ax and chopped off his big toe.

John and Mary heard the first screams before they rounded the point. Mary knelt and faced forward, picking up a paddle from the floor, and digging it into the water. The canoe raced forward like a frightened swan.

When they reached the campsite, Harvey was on his back, whimpering, and Joshua was kneeling, holding Harvey's foot and wrapping a white cloth around it. His right knee was in a pool of blood, and the light blotterlike cloth of his pants absorbed a spreading stain.

"He's partially sedated," said Joshua. "The toe flew into deep water, and I think a fish may have taken it. He'll walk with a slight limp for the rest of his life. Otherwise, he's in fair condition, but I wish he could be taken to a hospital."

"He did it on purpose, didn't he?" said Mary.

"I don't think he wanted to lose a toe," said Joshua, raising his voice above the mocking, jocular oboe music that came at them now from all points of the compass. "You know how idle thoughts come into the head without definitely suggesting a clear-cut action. It may have occurred to him, as it did back in Lumbertown, that an injury would get him sympathy. But then he may have just gotten careless in his distraction."

"Distraction?"

"I think he thought there was an unspoken agreement between you and him that you both would not go out of his sight. A tacit understanding."

"I felt it," said John.

"But you did go out of his sight. He wondered why. So did I."

"I saw a house over there," said John. "Worse than a house, a car. That means a road."

"Thank God for it," said Joshua. "Maybe the people who own the car will lend it to you. Or drive it themselves to the hospital."

"I don't think there's a hospital inside of forty miles."

"With a car, that's not too far," said Joshua. "How soon could you get him to a hospital portaging from lake to lake with your canoe?"

"Of course you're right," said John. "We'll have to take him to the house." He turned to Mary. "We'll have to spread out some sleeping bags to make a sort of a nest in the front half of the canoe. Then we'll put him in facing

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backward; so he can sort of half lie down with his back against the front seat, and his legs over the middle thwart. We can put a duffel bag under his feet. Of course only one of us can go in the canoe. The rest will have to walk."

"I saw a fairly fresh trail up on the hill," said Joshua. "It seemed to be heading in that direction."

"All right, Mary," said John. "You paddle him over there. We'll walk."

"I'm not sure I can get him out of the canoe when we get there," said Mary. "We only saw the one woman on the dock there. She looked frail, and what if she's alone?"

Joshua said, "Leave him in the canoe until we get there. That will give you time to explain our problem to the woman you saw. I want to talk with John in private."

"What if a wind comes up and makes waves?"

"I saw marsh grass at the end of the inlet by the dock," said John. "Pull the canoe up into the soft mud. Waves won't rock it. He'll be comfortable."

"O.K.," said Mary.

"You're taking this bravely," said Joshua. "Good for you."

"I'm not brave," said Mary. "I'm callous. And I'm angry as hell. As soon as this simple son-of-a-bitch is rational enough to listen to me, I'm going to burn his eardrums."

The hidden musician played a barnyard melody on a kazoo.

* * *

"I needed the sight and smell of blood," said John to Joshua as they climbed the trail to the rim of the cliff. "I keep forgetting that Luke is playing for keeps. Except for the background music, the game is too cool and civilized. You forget about destruction."

"Are you destroyed?"

"I don't know yet."

"When will you know, John?"

"Well, first I have to find out how to do what I know I have to do. Then I have to find out if I'm big enough to do it."

"I'll help you figure out *how*. I think you're big enough to do it."

"Even if it kills me?"

"It won't kill you, John. It may make you wish you were dead, but you'll survive that, too."

"All right. How do I do it?"

"Do you know what a scapegoat is, John?"

"Yes. The people load all their sins onto him and drive him into the wilderness. So they are saved from destruction, but the scapegoat isn't."

"The scapegoat is saved, too, but in a different way. He performs a holy task and he is rewarded accordingly."

"Still, I can't imagine why he would *volunteer* for the job. Goats are fun-loving creatures, and it doesn't sound like much fun."

"Goats don't volunteer, John. But some men do. And you're right. It isn't much fun. Neither is the alternative in the long run."

They stopped talking to scale a

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dead pine that had fallen across the trail. The kazoo became a Jew's harp. Twang, twang, twang.

"Tell me, Joshua," said John when they were striding easily again, "can Luke be decoyed away from a course he's pursuing? I mean, suppose he's concentrating on Mary and Harvey there, and I come along and pretend I'm ready to let him have his way with me — whatever his way is — would he drop them and concentrate on me?"

"Luke's mind is ubiquitous. He can concentrate on you and them at the same time. However, you might distract him for a moment. I've seen it happen in groups — small towns, for example. One person will invite total depravity, and in so doing will seem to strengthen all the others in the group. Of course part of what strengthens the others is the horrible spectacle of the depraved one."

"Thank you, Josh," said John. "I know what to do next."

"God bless you."

"I'll need it. How do I get Luke's attention?"

"Just call him. He'll come to you."

"All right. You go ahead, Josh. Tell them I had something important to do. I'll be there in an hour or two. Harvey can hold out an extra few hours, can't he?"

The woman in the peach slacks and dark blue shirt was full of kindly concern, but she was pinned down here until her husband and two boys came back from a fishing trip to the next lake (fish were more plentiful in the brown lakes than the blue one), and she didn't expect them until after dark. It was just beginning to get dusky.

"My Lionel will take you to Franklin in the Land-Rover. That's where the nearest hospital is. I'd take you myself, but I can't drive the thing even in daylight. It's no inconvenience for Lionel. He was planning to go there first thing in the morning. Our milk is going bad and we need a fresh supply for the boys. If he goes down tonight, he'll have an excuse to sleep in a motel and come back rested tomorrow. It's a terrible trip if you have to go and come in one day, but that's what we usually do. The question is, how are we going to get your young man out of the canoe and onto the dock? You look strong, but I'm not. I just got over hepatitis two months ago."

"He'll be comfortable until the rest of our party arrives. Two men. I'll just pull the canoe up into that marshy ground over there. That will keep it steady. And if you don't mind — I'm terribly grateful to you, and I'd like to sit and talk to you — but I think I'd better stay with my fiancé. He's sedated and he's not always lucid. If he's there and I'm here he might just get the idea he can get up and wander over. I have to be there to talk him out of his crazy notions. Don't I, Harvey baby?"

"Oh, shut up," said Harvey.

"You're right," said the woman.

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"I'll go in and chop up some fresh carrots to go with any fish the fellows bring home. We were saving the fresh vegetables for a special occasion, but this looks like it."

Joshua heard their voices before he came to where the trail turned downward toward the low ground at the mouth of the inlet.

"So what are you going to do next?" Mary was shouting. "Clip off your goddamn ear like Van Gogh?"

"Yeah. A perfect gift for a slut. But a toe would have been better. I'm sorry it fell in the water."

"What was I supposed to do with it?"

"Put it on a string and tie it around your neck. Touch it every now and then and think about a poor nothing that loved you."

"There you go," she said, "flying your humility like a flag."

"Oh, Mary, Mary. Oh, Mary." He was almost weeping, and the gypsy fiddle was back, playing "Hearts and Flowers" with a broad tremolo. "I hurt all over, Mary. Please, be nice to me."

"All right, you poor slob," she said. "I'll pity you. That's the whole game, isn't it? 'I hurt — pity me. I'm a nothing — pity me. My grandad turns on more girls than I do — pity me. Red coals jump out of fires and burn me, axes disobey me, my own big toe runs away from — goddamn it, pity me. I'm the center of the universe — so pity me or I'll shut my eyes and make you all vanish.' Isn't that right?"

"You're a cruel bitch."

"Now, now, Harvey, There, there, Harvey. Poor Harvey. How's that?"

"Oh, shut up. Go play games with Grampa."

Suddenly the music stopped.

Mary and Harvey were silenced, too. Their words had been floating on a melodic background. Unaccompanied, they sank. When Joshua got down to where they were, he found them looking at each other, frowning reflectively. But not with hostility.

When Luke had told them about the fully stocked hunter's lodge between this lake and the next one, he hadn't mentioned the fact that a road led to it. Knowledge of a road would have spoiled the wilderness myth.

"I should have figured it out, though," said John Jackson as he and Luke reached the top of a hill that overlooked the stone, concrete, and metal fortress. "There would have been too much to cart up here in canoes or backpacks. And there's no place around for a helicopter to land. You'd have to have trucks."

"Frankly," said Luke, "I wanted to tempt you with the idea of gourmet food in the middle of an inaccessible wilderness. I thought if I told you there was a road, you'd realize it wasn't inaccessible. You wouldn't have worried about food so much. You would have

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guessed a road would have brought campers and cottages and probably even a store."

"Is there a store?"

"Not yet," said Luke. "But there will be. There's only one cottage so far, but it's full of food."

"I saw it," said John.

"Then what did you drag me up here for? You don't need any food."

"I don't want food," said John.

"What do you want?"

"Booze. I haven't been on a real bat for five years, and I need one."

Luke grinned. "You'll find the goods here. No cooking whiskey. Bonded bourbon. Dated scotch."

"O.K. Good. I want to see how you unlock a stronghold like this."

"I do it with sound waves," said Luke. "If you have time I could teach you the trick."

"Never mind. Just get me in there."

"I can't think what got into me," said Mary. "He's fun to talk to, but he must be at least seventy."

"It's my fault," said Harvey. "I was a pain and I know it. I drove you into his arms."

"Not exactly his arms. It was more a meeting of minds. But Harvey, we were *talking* about *living* together. *Living* together! May and December. I would have bored him after a day. Maybe after an hour."

They were sitting on the dock watching the stars come out. Harvey's toe had stopped throbbing when the hidden musician had stopped playing, and Joshua had carried him up here to the dock.

The man of the house and his two boys had come home with a bucket full of flopping fish. They were inside, washing up now. The house was equipped with tub and showers, and water heated with bottled gas. The woman was in the kitchen fixing supper. Plans were to take Harvey to the hospital as soon as John Jackson came back from wherever he was.

Joshua had wandered off, saying he might or might not be back. In any event, he wouldn't want supper.

"Do you want *me* to tell Grampa?" said Harvey.

"No, I think it ought to be me. I just faced you and that was hard enough. I guess I can face him."

"You didn't have to *face* me, honey. I owe you more apologies than you owe me."

"Don't try to con me, Harvey."

"No, Mary. You don't understand. I'm not me; I'm somebody else. I have this crazy compulsion to blurt out the truth. Humor me while it lasts."

"All right. Blurt."

"I loused up this trip for everybody. I thought it was *my* trip. I was doing both of you a favor. I was giving Grampa a chance to revisit his old scenes, and I was showing you a new world. I expected gratitude and lots of attention. I didn't get either. So I sulked."

"All right; you've been candid. You

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don't have to go on."

"No, I've *got* to go on. I burned my hand on purpose."

"I know you did."

"Well, you were right. And I chopped off my goddamn toe on purpose. You knew that, too. I don't care what you knew. Actually I'm happy. I don't know why. I'm not really a star freak, but look at those stars! What *is* it?"

"It's the absence of music in the air," said Mary.

"And it's something else, too. I think I love you. Let's get reengaged."

"We never got *un*engaged. And I loved you all along. Something overpowered me. I thought I needed this intermezzo, but I never thought I wouldn't marry you. I wonder if John ... I wonder if Grampa is still fertile."

"He looks like the type. If there *is* a type."

"What if we had had a baby? Would you have married me anyway?"

"Sullenly, I think, but yes."

"Then we'd have had children. What would we have called the other kid? Would we have introduced it to the others as great aunt so-and-so or great uncle so-and-so? That didn't come out as funny as I thought it would."

"No, it didn't."

"I'm getting cold feet," said Mary. "How am I going to break it to John — I mean Gramps?"

"You know why he was a great professor?"

"I've heard this and that."

"He had a trick of drawing people out. He'll know you have something you want to tell him, and he'll draw it out of you. Painlessly."

"In a way, I still love him."

"You're supposed to love a grampa."

"Your bet you are," said John, lurching across the dock toward them.

Mary stiffened as he came up to her. You could smell the liquor on his breath five feet away.

He gripped both her arms just above the elbow and pulled her to him.

"C'mon, baby," he said. "Let's show sonny-boy here how the grown-ups make love."

"John, please." She jerked free of his grip.

He took another step and grabbed her again.

Harvey, ignoring the pain in his maimed foot, stood up and hit John in the face with his fist. Harvey was no boxer. Even if he had been, he wouldn't have hit hard.

Nevertheless, John fell over backward.

"Oh God," said Mary.

"I can't have hurt him much," said Harvey.

John sat up slowly.

"I'm just a poor old man," he said, in a thick whine. "I think you killed me. Lord, I hurt. Mary, honey, come and let me put my head in your lap."

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"Don't, Mary," said Harvey. "he's faking. I ought to know."

"All right," said John. "All right. I'm gonna get the canoe and paddle back to our camp. Don't come after me. You let these people take you to the hospital, and then you can find your own way home. You got plenty of money."

"John," said Mary. "What are you going to do? We love you, John."

"Cut it out, Mary," said Harvey. "He can handle himself. Let him go wherever he's going."

John staggered to the end of the dock nearest the marshy cove where the canoe was pulled up. Then he floundered through the muck, dragged the canoe out into the water, half fell into the bow, stumbled, staggered and crawled to the stern, then backwatered clumsily into deep water.

"You had your chance, Mary!" he shouted. "You could've turned me into a god ... that's right, a god. You would've been a goddess. Now I'm just a poor old man. Beat up and rejected and abused. Well, that's life. Weep no tears for me. Fare thee well. Fare thee well. We shall not meet again!"

He paddled off into the dark.

"What shall we do, Harvey?"

"He's tough. Don't worry about him. There's food and firewood and blankets and everything else he needs at our campsite. We'll just have to go on down to the hospital, and see about train connections or bus connections to the city. One of these days he'll come back, looking a little sheepish, and we'll pretend nothing ever happened."

"I wish you hadn't hit him."

"I haven't got a punch anyway, and I pulled what little punch I had. He was faking. What an old fraud he is. 'I'm an old man. Mary, honey, let me put my head in your lap.'"

"It reminds me of somebody else I know."

"Oh, stop it."

Early in the morning John Jackson moved everything to the next lake, a root beer-water lake separated from the blue-green lake by five hundred yards. It took him three trips to carry over the canoe and all the gear, including two now-unneeded sleeping bags. He had hoped the rigors of the portage would divert his thoughts from his despair.

It didn't work. The skies were as bleak as his mood, but the trail was as easy and as well marked as he ought to have remembered it from fifty years ago. It was almost a pleasant portage. A harsh, prolonged trill made him wonder for a second if Luke was behind him again; then he saw that it came from a tiny bunch of rustling leaves on the tip of a fragile wild cherry tree, and he decided it had to be a bird. He wished he had paid more attention when Daddy gave him lessons on how tell birds by their cries.

Then it showed its head above the cluster of leaves, and it wasn't a bird; it was a chipmunk.

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Did chipmunks ever feel despair?

John made a camp on a shelf of granite that presented a three-foot-high diving platform into six feet of water. Then he undressed and swam. A swim had always improved his disposition when he was a little boy. It didn't now.

He got out of the water, toweled himself, dressed, put mosquito repellent on his hands and neck and brow, and sat down to eat cold beans out of a can.

Joshua strode out of a fir thicket behind him and came to sit beside him.

"How do you feel, John?"

"There's no adjective for *how* I feel. Ask me *what* I feel and I'll give you a noun."

"Despair?"

"Despair and something else," said John. "There's a feeling we call being in love. A taut, tremulous, delicious feeling that seems to be centered in or near the heart. I don't have a precise noun for *that*."

"There isn't one," said Joshua. "it's too fleeting for love. It can come at the first sight of the Grand Canyon, or on an amazing pink morning in winter after a week of sleet and snow. You can't build a way of life on it."

"But you can build a way of life on what it can lead to. *That's* love."

"John, did you ever put your mind to what your future would have been with Mary?"

"I put my *mind* to it, but we were talking about feeling. I don't feel with my mind."

"Try to," said Joshua. "Try to imagine abandonment. That was one of the two possibilities. You and she may have talked breezily about a short affair, but 'short' means somebody has to take the initiative and end it cruelly, while the other person believes it has hardly begun. Mary would have been the abandoner. You knew that, didn't you?"

"If it had been that way, yes. But there was the other possibility."

"All right. Mary is good-hearted and basically moral. When you became senile and had to be fed and diapered, she might feel morally obliged to chain herself to you and tend you. You might be lucid enough to understand that she was doing this. You might in fact be *too* lucid to allow her to think that if she put you away in a nursing home you wouldn't know the difference. She might even—"

"Stop it, Joshua! I feel it. I feel it."

"In two or three months you'll be happy again, poking your nose into some new tidbit of historical research, or learning a new pibroch. You may even find a widow your age. What's more, you will have begun to understand what you did last night. You may have begun to take pride in it, but beware of that."

"Just what did I really do?"

"For one thing, you stopped the music. It will come back. To them and to you. But it loses poignancy when it's repeated too much. Like last year's top ten."

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"I wish I hadn't had to make a fool of myself in front of them."

"You had to. Only a public fool can force people to see their own foolishness. In rejecting the public fool, they reject their own turpitude. Or, looking at it another way, if the hero in the melodrama suddenly puts on a top hat and a black moustache, the villain is obliged to put on a white cowboy hat and save the old homestead from foreclosure. *Somebody* has to. Also — though it's less important — you lifted a load of guilt from Mary and Harvey. Guilt — like Luke — has a way of returning, but a day without it is a memorable day. And salubrious, too."

"I hope salubrious," said John. "I couldn't see that I was doing them any favors. Poor Harvey could have used a word or two of praise."

"Praise is junk food. It's good — like a candy bar — but not salubrious. There's more nutrition in scorn and obloquy."

John laughed.

"That's too stern a doctrine for me. Come on, Joshua — see that rock out there in the middle of the lake? I'll race you there there and back."

They stripped, dove off the ledge, and churned through brown water that turned their bodies golden. It was less than hundred meters there and back, but John found it took his wind away. Still, Joshua didn't beat him by much.

This time, John found that the water had improved his disposition. Still panting, he chopped up a dead log, got a fire going, and made a pot of tea.

"I don't usually, but I'll take a little tea with you, John," said Joshua.

They sat, sipping in silence, watching two dragonflies play tag over the water.

Finally Joshua put down his mug and said, "I shouldn't hand out candy bars, but this is a small one. I don't think it will give you indigestion. You did a good job last night."

"Thank you. The next time I make a noble gesture I want to do it like Sidney Carton at the guillotine. I've even rehearsed it."

He struck a pose, and said, in an upper-class British accent:

"It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done."

Joshua laughed, said good-bye, and walked back into the fir thicket.

John heard wolves that night, not howling but yapping. Little wolves. He had heard wolves here fifty years ago, and his Ojibwa Indian friend, Mike, had suggested they urinate on the red coals of the fire. It seemed to keep the wolves at bay, but it almost drove John and Mike away, too.

He didn't even bother to keep a fire going tonight, half hoping that the wolf pack (even if it consisted of puppies) would find him and eat him. A painful death would be better than a gentle but sad one.

At about two in the morning he heard a bagpipe playing one of the

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funky pibrochs, full of honks and burbles.

He knew it well, but he couldn't remember the name. "Salute to Somebody or Other."

If Mary were here she might know the name.

If Mary were here ...

"Oh, knock it off, Luke," he said, in the tired, disgusted tone of voice he imagined Jesus must have used when he said, "Get thee behind me, Satan."

No wolves came to visit him that night. Next morning he caught a fish for breakfast.

There would be plenty more fish. And three more portages to three more lakes. And every day he would be a day older and a day happier, and if he wept in the night no one would see him.

Unless Joshua came out of another thicket of fir trees.

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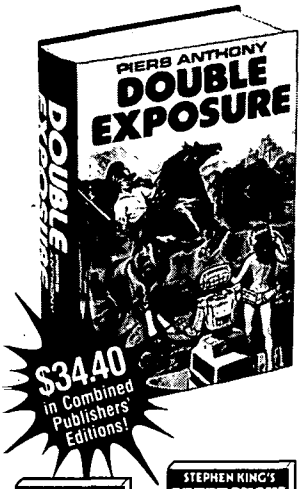

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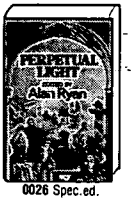

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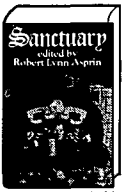

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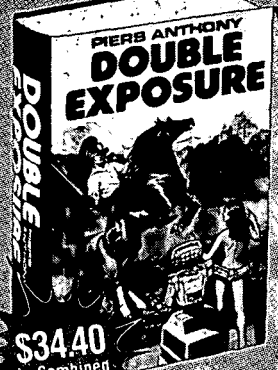

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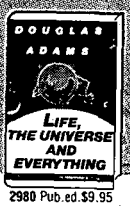

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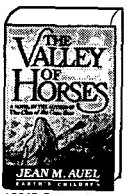

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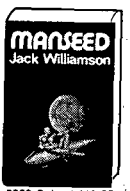

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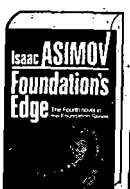

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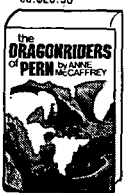

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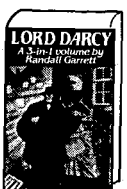

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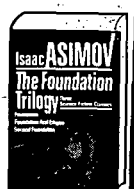

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